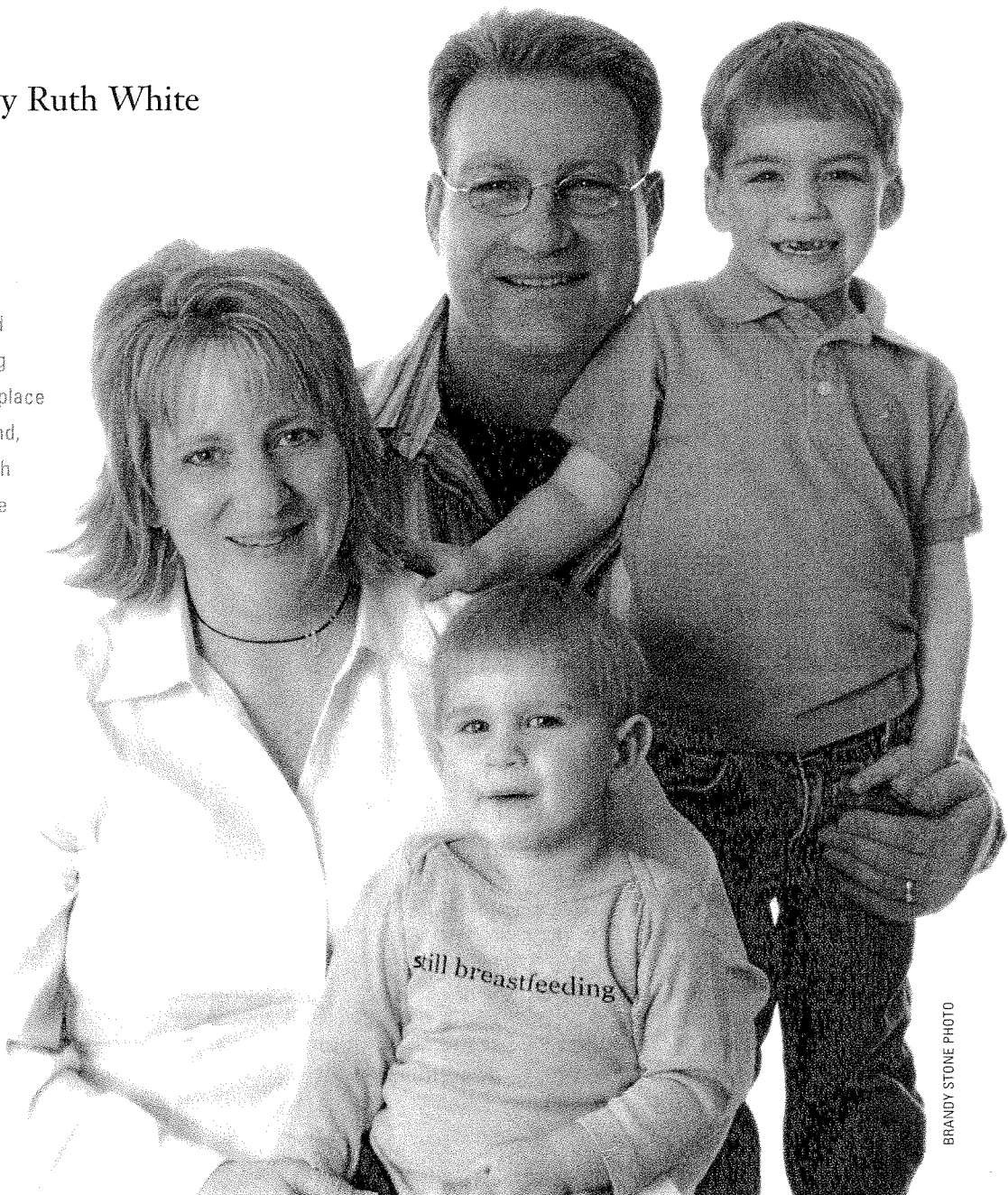


Parents Turn Anger into Advocacy

Their Children's Needs Motivate Them to Work to Change Laws

by Ruth White

Kimberly Rechner's bad experiences expressing breast milk in the workplace led Kim and her husband, Michal Rechner, to push for legislation to require employers to support breastfeeding mothers. They are pictured with their sons, Lance, 4, and Logan, 2.



BRANDY STONE PHOTO

A common phrase instructs us in what to do when we're angry: "Don't get mad, get even." We usually think of "getting even" as a vengeful act, but it can also mean using our anger to make a difference.

Most of us, when our children's needs are unmet or we feel we've been treated unjustly, call a friend and vent. Sometimes that is enough to make us feel better. Most of us, when tragedy strikes our lives, mourn the loss with our family and friends for a few weeks and then grieve quietly because we "don't want to bother anyone." A small group of us take that injustice or tragedy and turn our anger into action to advocate for change.

When Candy Lightner's adolescent daughter died in 1980 at the hands of a repeat offender drunk driver, she "got even" by joining with a group of other angry mothers to found the advocacy group Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (later changed to Mothers Against Drunk Driving or MADD). The success of MADD's political lobbying is legendary.

Within two years, a Presidential Commission on Drunk Driving was created and federal funding was set aside for anti-drunk driving efforts. Since 1980, drunk driving laws and sentencing guidelines have stiffened around the country. People who drink and drive, or let friends drink and drive, are now thought to be irresponsible and socially reprehensible. Even bartenders can be prosecuted for allowing inebriated

customers to drive.

Two Puget Sound families, like Lightner, turned their anger into activism to change social policy.

LACEY COUPLE URGES SUPPORT FOR BREASTFEEDING MOTHERS IN THE WORKPLACE

Lacey resident Kimberly Rechner had never considered herself an advocate until she became a nursing mother and suffered the discomfort of pumping breast milk in the crowded break room at work. The married mother of two children – Lance, now 4, and Logan, now 2 – had strong beliefs on certain issues, but had never tried to "change the world."

"It is pretty easy to stand on a sidewalk holding a sign against war," she says. "It is another thing to organize the rally itself or take the issue to lawmakers that can actually make a difference."

After giving birth to Logan, she wanted to express breast milk at work, as she had with her first son, but didn't want to do it in the same small break room, shoulder-to-shoulder with coworkers. She got mad, especially after it was suggested that she pump in the bathroom if she didn't like the break room. According to Kim and her husband, Michal Rechner, hospital management seemed to give her supportive feedback, but there was never any follow-through action to change the situation. The irony is that she was a registered nurse in a

hospital that encouraged their new mothers to breastfeed.

Then the Rechners took action. Kim staged a protest in the lobby of the hospital. After doing some research on workplace breastfeeding laws, the couple realized that Washington state was "behind the times." Nine other states already have laws relating to the issue.

They contacted the Breastfeeding Coalition, the Children's Alliance and the state Department of Health to see if any changes were in the works. Then they helped draft a bill based on a recent bill introduced in Massachusetts and current law in California. Senate Bill 6066 and Substitute Senate Bill 5600 to "study breastfeeding women in the workplace" in Washington stalled last year, but have been re-introduced this legislative session.

Kim received mixed reactions from her colleagues. "Some didn't understand what the fuss was all about. Others were supportive, but it didn't seem they were comfortable openly expressing their support in the workplace," she says.

For Michal, it was a different story. He works for the Department of Natural Resources as an environmental planner doing legislative analysis and policy development. He reports that his friends and coworkers were openly supportive, and a few even contacted legislators on their behalf.

Their goal is to have legislation passed that will require employers to

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– Lacey mother Kimberly Rechner



Anna McCartney of Seattle (far right, holding her then 1-year-old daughter Olivia) was instrumental in lobbying for a 2005 bill to allow children to bring their epinephrine autoinjectors and asthma inhalers with them to public schools. McCartney's involvement was spurred by a life-threatening allergic reaction suffered by her son Ewan, then 4 (on Gov. Christine Gregoire's lap as she signed the bill last May).

provide support to breastfeeding mothers returning to work. This support would include dedicated spaces to express breast milk in the workplace and flexible work scheduling. They know that this takes time but say they are confident that legislation will eventually pass in Washington.

Being advocates has changed the way the Rechners see the world. They say they are now more aware of children's issues. Their advice for other parents is to remember that change sometimes comes slowly; to get support for their efforts; and to keep their supporters involved and engaged. "Don't ever doubt yourself. Stay focused and know that what you are doing is right," Kim advises.

Readers can contact the Rechners at rechners@comcast.net. For information on the breastfeeding bill, go to <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/billinfo/> and type in the bill numbers 6066 and 5600.

SEATTLE MOTHER LOBBIES FOR CHILDREN WITH ALLERGIES

Seattle-area stay-at-home-mom Anna McCartney was a doctorate student in linguistics, married to Colin, a software engineer, when she gave birth to her first child, Ewan, now 5. In the fall of 2001, when Ewan was 11 months old, he had a near-fatal allergic reaction to eggs. He went into anaphylactic shock the first time he was given eggs. By the time the

fire department arrived, he was blue, covered in hives, unconscious and not breathing. His face was swollen, and his throat had closed. By the time the emergency medical technicians arrived, he was lifeless and in cardiac distress. He was revived with a shot of epinephrine.

This was McCartney's first step into life as a food allergy mom. She had never met anyone who lived with a life-threatening allergy. She felt afraid and alone. That soon changed.

She joined – and later became the co-leader of – a local food allergy family support group, Food Education Allergy Support Team or FEAST (www.seattlefoodallergy.org) and a member of a national group, Kids with Food Allergies (www.kidswithfoodallergies.org). She found these organizations to be of tremendous help, and she liked sharing with others what she had learned.

A few years ago, the Food Allergy Labeling and Consumer Protection Act was before Congress. The bill requires ingredients listed on food packages to be written in *plain English* (i.e. "contains milk"). Most packages list only the chemical names, which most lay people do not recognize as familiar substances. According to McCartney, there are 18 terms used for eggs and 30 for dairy products. For example, derivatives of milk include *casein* and *whey*, whereas, *lysozyme* is a derivative of eggs.

McCartney was frustrated by this and was afraid to let anyone but herself

read food labels for her son.

So she sprang into action. She did some research using the Internet, developed an information sheet on the bill and took it into the local office of her Congressman, Jim McDermott. While she was speaking with his local health legislative assistant, Congressman McDermott walked down the hall and began speaking with McCartney. She told him her story, and the next day she got a call from the assistant saying that McDermott had signed on as a co-sponsor.

McCartney was surprised and inspired by her initial success. "I had gone in and asked my Congressman for help, and he'd done what I asked! Wow!" She approached the state's two senators, Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell, and they signed on as sponsors, as did some of the other Washington members of Congress she asked.

McCartney spent hours and lots of ink cartridges on her home computer printing up thousands of postcards. One side had a picture of a child with a food allergy (the child of one of her support group members) and the other side contained information about the bill. The postcards were pre-addressed to go to the members of Congress.

McCartney gave these postcards to members of her food allergy group to distribute. She also sent them to Washington members of Congress who had yet to sign on as co-sponsors.

Eventually, five of Washington's nine Congresspersons signed on to the bill. She even got her grandfather into the act. He received a set of postcards at his home in Honolulu, which he distributed to everyone he knew. He also paid a visit to his Congressperson, who also signed on to the bill.

The bill passed unanimously and starting Jan. 1, 2006, food ingredient labels list the top eight food allergens in *plain English*, in addition to using the chemical terms.

Her son's near-fatal experience also motivated McCartney to lobby for two changes to state law, passed in 2005. One of the bills requires school districts to allow students to bring prescribed epinephrine autoinjectors (for allergic reactions) and asthma inhalers to school and to self-administer the medication. It also requires schools to have backup medication on hand. She cites the case of a Spokane boy with a severe peanut allergy who was accidentally given a lunch containing peanuts while he was on a school field trip a few years ago. "The chaperone didn't know anything about food allergies, the teacher hadn't brought his emergency medications, nobody had a cell phone with them to call 911 ... and he ended up dying," she recounts.

The second bill allows emergency medical technicians (EMTs), and not just paramedics, to administer epinephrine, and it removes the restrictions that the EMTs must first see a prescription for a child under 18 or must have permission from a parent or guardian in person or in writing. "Six years ago, a food-allergic girl died on Mercer Island because the fire fighters got there in plenty of time, but they didn't have epinephrine, so they had to stand around doing nothing while they waited for the paramedics," McCartney says. "The girl died."

The McCartneys chose to adopt their daughter Olivia, now 21 months, because her food allergies made her a hard-to-adopt child. Since Olivia is adopted, McCartney could not breast-feed her, and she had a severe intolerance for cow's milk or soy milk. The baby

required a special formula, which cost \$700-\$800 per month and was not covered by the family's health insurance because it is classified as food, rather than medicine.

Although both her children have now outgrown their food intolerances and allergies, McCartney continues to lobby on behalf of other children. She is now working on getting a law passed to require insurance companies to cover special formulas for children who have allergies and no other options.

McCartney's advice to other parents is to not be intimidated by the process. She recommends that parents simply approach their elected official and say, "I have this problem. I need you to help me."

Anna McCartney can be reached at anna@foodallergyaction.org.

Being an advocate can be as simple as making a phone call or writing a letter. A visit to an elected official or policy maker has the most effect. According to Nancy Amidei of the Civic Engagement Project at the University of Washington, "Advocacy is fun. There is a tremendous exhilaration in winning, as well as a lot of satisfaction in just trying."

Being stuck in anger engenders feelings of pain, powerlessness and frustration. If we can use our passion to fuel our actions, we can dissipate anger's negative effects. Action leads to increased feelings of control.

The journey to a changed self and/or a changed world is no exception to the rule that the longest journey starts with the first step. As Margaret Mead once said, "*A small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.*"

Ruth White is the mother of an 8-year-old girl and is assistant professor and director of the Social Work program at Seattle University, where she teaches classes on social policy, advocacy and community organizing.

Resources for Becoming an Advocate

The Washington State Legislature operates its Legislative Hotline during session (regular session this year is scheduled to end March 9). Call 1-800-562-6000 Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. - 8 p.m.; Saturday, 9 a.m. - 1 p.m. To find your legislator, view his or her home page or track the progress of a bill, visit the Web site at www1.leg.wa.gov.

The United States Congress Web site, www.house.gov, includes links to the offices of Washington State Representatives, as well as schedules and progress of bills. If you do not have Internet access, call 202-224-3121.

PUBLICATIONS

"They Represent You!" is an annual publication of The League of Women Voters and an excellent guide to all elected officials; the Seattle Chapter also publishes "Washington State Voter" newsletters and action handbooks. 206-329-4848; www.seattle.wlv.org; info@seattlewlv.org.

"So You Want to Make a Difference: Advocacy is the Key" by Nancy Amidei (OMB Watch, 2002) is distributed by OMB (Office of Management and Budget) Watch, a national nonprofit research and advocacy organization. 202-234-8494; www.ombwatch.org (click on "Publications" and type in the title); ombwatch@ombwatch.org.

"Influencing the Rule-Making Process in Washington State: A Role for Citizens in Public Policy" by David Del Villar Fox can be viewed or downloaded through the University of Washington School of Social Work, at www.depts.washington.edu/sswweb/policyw/Washington_APA.pdf.

ORGANIZATIONS

Seattle Community Network is a free public-access computer network created for community empowerment; go to www.scn.org and click on "Activism" for links to dozens of local organizations.

The Children's Alliance is a statewide child advocacy organization. It issues reports and policy statements on legislative issues. Individuals can become members and/or sign up to receive Updates and Alerts. 206-324-0340; www.childrensalliance.org.

The Children's Defense Fund is a national group advocating for child health, welfare and education. 1-800-233-1200; www.childrensdefense.org.

Families USA is a national nonprofit nonpartisan organization seeking to promote affordable and high quality health care for all Americans. 202-628-3030; www.familiesusa.org.

insightful songs, mixed with a childlike perspective, make for a toe-tapping, finger-snapping good time.

- ***My Beautiful World***, Jack Grunsky, Casablanca Kids, 2006; \$14.98 CD; www.casablancakids.com. A spot-on connection to kids, world music sensibilities and great production make this a top-notch release.
- ***Scat Like That – A Musical Word Odyssey***, Cathy Fink & Marcy Marxer, Rounder Records, 2005; \$14.98 CD; www.rounder.com. More fun-filled tunes from two veterans who educate as they entertain with songs about pirates, tongue twisters, limericks and riddles.
- ***Tall and Small***, Rebecca Frezza, Big Truck Music, 2006; \$15 CD; www.bigtruckmusic.com. Strong vocals and harmonies, assured songs and stellar arrangements make Frezza an artist to watch (and hear).

For Ages 8 & Up

- ***Escape of the Slinkys – Clever Songs for Clever Kids***, Nancy Tucker, A Gentle Wind, 2005; \$14.95 CD; www.gentlewind.com. Clever adults will find these clever tunes by this clever wordsmith highly entertaining, too!
- ***French Playground***, Various Artists, Putumayo World Music, 2005; \$14.98 CD; www.putumayo.com/playground.html. This well-performed audiologue of French culture hits the mark.
- ***My Best Day***, Trout Fishing in America, Trout Records, 2006; \$14.98 CD; www.troutmusic.com. If you don't want milk shooting out your nose, don't drink milk while listening to this recording!

