

Testimony of Angela Monserrate

WHAT DOES THE ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF QUEBEC (ASEQ-EHAQ) MEAN TO ME?

I have suffered from environmental sensitivities (chemical, mould and electromagnetic sensitivity) since 1986. This condition made it impossible to tolerate products with a Petro-chemical base (personal, cleaning, construction and renovation products, all fragranced products, newsprint, all new products, etc.) and devices that emitted electromagnetic frequencies, such as computers and cell phones. To live in health and without serious symptoms, I had to avoid all these products, which is not easy. I was able to find products that I could tolerate.

By 1993 I was unable to work or live in Montreal. Smoking was then allowed in most public places, herbicide trucks roamed suburbs and parcs. My doctor, Dr John Molot, told me I had to leave Montreal. He gave me three choices to go live in: a forest, a desert or a tropical beach. I chose a beach. First a small, relatively, underdeveloped island in the Caribbean, then a small town by the ocean in Florida.

In these places I was able to avoid triggers that made me ill, have mostly great fresh clean air, and follow some helpful treatments. The steep price of my move, apart from the obvious economic one, was severe and constant isolation.

By 2010, public smoking and herbicide use had been somewhat controlled in Montreal and I felt recuperated enough to try to return to be near my family, at first for a few weeks, then for a few months of the year. It was impossible to find an apartment without multiple chemical and electromagnetic exposures which made me very ill, so I had to move often and was often discouraged about my intention to spend some time, finally, with my family on a regular basis. But, for the short term, I toughed it out.

Luckily, I heard about the Environmental Health Association of Quebec (ASEQ-EHAQ), and the first time I needed them, they came through for me in the most spectacular and life-altering way.

One June evening I learned by accident that in 36 hours my landlady was planning to sand and varnish the whole apartment downstairs from mine. I reacted with very strong symptoms on exposure to the fumes of varnish. I lived in an old building with wooden floors and walls that were not well sealed, so all chemical products that were used in the building and all cooking odours came into my apartment. This was very hard for me, since I was constantly having symptoms from exposure to different chemicals. I survived the ordeal with the maximum use of three air purifiers. However, these air purifiers would not be enough for the serious onslaught of varnish.

I had to get out. But where to? I was still newly-returned to Montreal. Due to common use of products that made me ill, staying a few weeks with my family or casual acquaintances was out of the question. Even hotels could not accommodate me. I was soon to be homeless. In despair I called ASEQ-EHAQ and explained my situation. ASEQ-EHAQ answered and immediately went into full problem-solving mode. They posted an S.O.S on ASEQ-EHAQ's email list and within hours we heard from various total strangers, one as far away as Vancouver, understanding my situation and generously offering me safe, emergency accommodation until my apartment was safe enough for me to return.

It was the most heart-warming, stunning and unexpected experience I have ever had since I developed Environmental Sensitivities. A whole group of total strangers extending their hands out to me unreservedly in my hour of need.

On the morning the varnishing was to begin, I was already on my way to two of these total strangers' safe home. They put me up and put up with me with the utmost generosity, kindness and – a bonus – much humour, affection and laughter. Since then, they and their friends (ASEQ-EHAQ core members mostly), have continued to unstintingly offer me succor, long-distance support, friendship, information, advice, understanding, referrals, plus more hospitality, refuge and transport whenever I needed to flee some chemical and or other assault in the Montreal apartment. Once for an entire four months! Without their warm friendship and the entire ASEQ-EHAQ organization, I would never have been able to return to live near my only daughter and three wonderful grand children, be a

part of their lives and to counter balance the great isolation and exile imposed on most of us with Environmental Sensitivities.

And mine, is only just one small example.

So: what the Environmental Health Association of Quebec (ASEQ-EHAQ) mean to me?

Survival, support, hope, generosity, friendship, laughter, caring, vital information exchange, expert advice, education, necessary social change, community, humanity, amazingly dedicated people who themselves work heroically through their own serious afflictions in order to improve our lives in small and large ways, at the individual and social level, in temporary and permanent ways.

It would be hard to overestimate the amount of work and perseverance, intelligence, organization and sheer guts and faith necessary to have undertaken the project for safe housing for people suffering from Environmental Sensitivities, which ASEQ-EHAQ has. In addition to all the other support services and projects that the group carries out on behalf of those who suffer from this disabling health condition, much work is being done to educate to create awareness and bring about change. If we had healthier environments in which to live, play, study, worship, life would be inclusive again and so much better for people like me.

A huge heart-felt thank you to all at ASEQ-EHAQ for helping me break out of isolation and exclusion and for giving me hope.