

Allergic to her classroom

By Sue Johnson, Novato Advance, June 22, 1983

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Society Edited by Sue Johnson

Allergic to her classroom

Art teacher quits

By SUE JOHNSON

Art teacher Esther Quinonez loves art, but it doesn't love her.

She resigned last week as art teacher at North Marin High School because she has become allergic to paints, sprays, glazes, glues, and other materials indispensable to the art classroom.

She didn't realize it was an allergic reaction to chemicals that was causing her dizziness, nausea, ringing in her ears, faintness, headaches, disorientation, loss of voice, a feeling that she was suffocating, and aggravation of a problem she has had for years: asthma.

Last fall, she had such a severe asthma attack she was hospitalized. She was referred to a clinical ecologist, Dr. Jeffery Anderson of Mill Valley.

He found that she was allergic to petrochemicals and many other chemicals. She learned she has probably been suffering from allergies for at least six years.

She was sent home with an oxygen tank and orders to remove everything synthetic from her house. Her couch and bed were the first things to go. She now sleeps on a cotton mat.

She had to replace much of her wardrobe with new clothes of cotton or wool. Plastic or rubber kitchen utensils are verboten. She even had to replace her plastic eyeglasses with metal frames.

She has to avoid foods that contain chemicals. It means spending a considerable time searching, mainly in health food stores. She has to use a water purifier in her home. And she must avoid smog.

She gets sick easily, apparently because her immune system has been impaired.

Despite all this, Esther says it was a relief to know what the problem was. "I thought I was dying. Now I know what I have to deal with."

She takes treatments to build up her resistance to chemicals. It may take years, she was told.

She has been on sick leave since October. She doesn't know what other career she might turn to. "It depends on what type of environment I can handle."

Classrooms have furniture and even flooring that she is allergic to, she says.

Esther has taught in the district for 16 years — at San Jose Junior High and North Marin High. "I'll miss teaching," she says.



ESTHER QUINONEZ WITH THE PAINTS THAT PROVED HER UNDOING
(Advance Photo by Harold Brown)

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