

A chemically free rooming house in Dallas



A heavily contaminated house became an excellent rooming house for people with severe chemical sensitivities.

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Ms. C. got severe MCS in the 1980s and moved from her native Florida to Dallas, Texas. Here was Dr. Rea's clinic and she could live in the Ecology Housing camp in the Seagoville area on the edge of the big city.

Her health stabilized, but she still needed very safe housing to live in. Living in the Seagoville camp was not very comfortable, so she looked elsewhere, but her means were limited.

Someone donated a house in Seagoville to a local church. It was a one-story four-bedroom brick house on a large suburban lot, and it was in good condition. But it was heavily contaminated with fragrances.

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The prior residents had used several electric “plug in” fragrance emitters, which heat up and evaporate a fragrance gel that coats everything in a house.

The pastor at the church knew about Ms. C’s housing need and offered to sell it to her for a small amount. Ms. C. had now lived at the camp for six years and realized this might be her only chance of ever getting a house, so she bought it despite the contamination.

Moving in right away

She could not afford to pay rent at the camp while she worked on the house, so she had to move in right away. For the first year she slept in her car in the driveway. The saved rent money she used to slowly renovate the house.

She aired out the house as much as possible with fans bringing outside air in through the windows.

The house was built on a concrete slab with no basement. She pulled up all the carpets, which were major pollution sinks. For years, she walked on the raw concrete floors, until they could be covered with tile.

The least-contaminated part of the house was the attached two-car garage, so she focused on that from the start. She installed a little kitchen there with a sink and a refrigerator. Later on she replaced the two garage doors with a glass wall that had two doors to the outside.

Eventually she could sleep in the converted garage. That was a tremendous improvement from sleeping in the car.

Heating, cooling, and ventilation

The house already had a heat pump that could both heat and cool the house by sending air through air ducts.

The ducts were cleaned and left in place. The system worked fine in the summer, but in the winter the hot air coming from the registers did not smell okay. For heating she instead used portable electric heaters made of powder coated steel that does not have any really hot parts, which minimizes the fried dust problem.

It would have been too expensive to redo the ventilation system and add large filters, especially if adding a fresh-air intake. It was not needed anyway.

The only ventilation is the standard type of exhaust in the bathrooms and above the stove. Each bedroom has a large air purifier with zeolite filtration, but they are not always turned on.

The main house

She aired out the house for years, but the fragrances had simply permeated the gypsum drywall.

Rather than replacing all the drywall she opted for the cheaper encapsulation. She used aluminum foil as wallpaper to seal in the fumes.



Bedroom with foiled walls, tiled floor, and an air purifier in the corner. The furniture is of steel and glass.

With enough money saved up, the floors were tiled.

After four years the renovations were finished and Ms. C. was living in her house. It was a great success.

The only problem was one of the smaller bedrooms, which never really became great despite various further attempts. There is nothing that can be smelled inside, but lots of people just don't feel well there after some time.

Renters

To make some money, she rented out three of the bedrooms to people with chemical sensitivities. She generally did not accept people who also had electrical sensitivities, as that was too difficult in such close quarters.

For a while she also rented out a space in the yard to someone who lived in a modified Airstream trailer. The trailer had no bathroom, so the renter had to use the bathroom in the house.

All the renters shared one bathroom. To make that work it was necessary for Ms. C. to approve any and all personal care products the renters were allowed to use.

The converted garage became the lounge for the renters, with a small kitchen and laundry area. It had a washing machine, a refrigerator, and a freezer for their use.

It was a large sunny space as one wall was entirely made of glass with two glass doors to the outside.

Ms. C. did not provide any meals. That was up to the renters themselves. Many of them had severe food allergies and must eat restricted diets, sometimes using more unusual foods such as quinoa and bison meat.

Ms. C. kept the original kitchen and master bedroom suite for herself.

The living room in the center of the house was not really used for anything other than displays of Ms. C's collection of figurines (all completely inert, of course).

The cars were parked on the grass along the short driveway instead of right next to the house. This was to limit the fumes from oils and exhausts.

Ms. C. kept the rents affordable, so it was often the cheapest option in town. She mostly relied on referrals from Dr. Rea's clinic and word of mouth to find renters, with the occasional ad in the *Our Toxic Times* newsletter (no longer published).

Most of the time she had two renters. One of the bedrooms never became really great (as mentioned earlier), so it was rarely rented by anyone. For some it was a stepping stone until something better opened up.

About

The picture at the top was taken in 2002, showing the front of the house with the garage/lounge to the right. Note the cars were not allowed to park on the concrete space in front, as that was too close.

This writer once spent a night in the house and has visited several other times. The indoor climate is wonderful, it is hard to imagine the house was once very toxic.

More information

More articles about all aspects of building and renovating housing for the environmental ill at www.eiwellspring.org/saferhousing.html.

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