

POA's continuing coverage of this important case

chronically ill, and they had no idea why.

their youngest daughter.

## Sick House, Suffering Family

Mold Leads to Big Health Problems, Legal Battle in Loudoun

By Jonathan Mummolo, Washington Post Staff Writer

Feb. 2009

But over the next year, they noticed a pattern: The more they were out of the house, the better they felt. After doing some detective work, they discovered that the source of their pain was the place they called home.

In court, the company denied that the way it assembled the house led to the mold, said it was not responsible for cleaning it up and did not think that the mold made the Mengs sick.

Barbara Drees Jones, vice president of marketing for Kentucky-based Drees, declined to comment on the case because attorneys for Drees are going

back to court Friday to ask the judge to set aside the verdict. Kurt C. Rommel, an attorney for Drees, said it would be inappropriate to comment until the judge enters a decision on the jury verdict.

Wendy Meng said their new home sat on the premier lot in the neighborhood, on half an acre, with a pretty pond behind it.

She and her husband loved the wrought iron staircase, Brazilian cherry flooring, high ceilings and three fireplaces.

"We were so excited. This was my dream house," she said. "I used to come down in the morning and pinch myself. It was so beautiful."

Before moving into their new 5,900-square-foot house in the Tall Cedar Estates subdivision in November 2005, the Mengs said, they asked the Drees company to fix a few problems, including leaky windows in the basement.



The migraines began three months after Wendy Meng moved into her new [Loudoun County](#) house. They lasted for hours, forcing her to sleep in her closet because she was so sensitive to light. Then her heart rate started spiking.

Before long, her 8-year-old daughter, Emma, started having headaches, feeling dizzy and suffering nosebleeds. Wendy's husband, Paul, a runner on the track team in college, was short of breath after climbing the stairs. A raft of tests by doctors came back negative. The Mengs were

Shoddy construction and unmended leaks had let moisture in, allowing toxin-producing mold to grow and spread through the three-story house, the Mengs said. A Loudoun jury recently awarded the family \$4.75 million, among the largest awards in a mold case in Virginia.

Jurors said the home's builder, the Drees Co., was negligent and violated the Virginia Consumer Protection Act. They said the company was responsible for the couple's health problems but not Emma's,

Continued on page 24

## Sick House

Continued from page 23



Drees told the Mengs that the windows had been fixed, but puddles in the basement persisted after the family moved into its \$900,000 home in the Chantilly area of Loudoun, the Mengs said. They later learned that Drees had not allowed the house's frame to dry before installing drywall, creating the perfect conditions for mold to thrive all over the house, the Mengs said.

In February 2006, the migraines began.

"We were very scared. I was in bed 95 percent of the time," said Wendy Meng, 37. "All we ever wanted was to be able to have a home."

On March 30, 2006, she went to see her family doctor in Herndon, who noticed one of her pupils was dilated. The doctor called an ambulance, and she was rushed to a hospital and given a CAT scan, she said. She was given heavy painkillers, referred to a neurologist and released, she said.

She was readmitted to the hospital for four days in April with a racing pulse and high blood pressure. She was referred to a cardiologist, and another battery of tests was inconclusive, she said.

The pattern of tests, referrals and failed treatments would continue over the next year, Wendy Meng said. She was hospitalized seven times and experienced memory loss, heart palpitations and difficulty breathing, all without knowing why, she said. Meanwhile, the rest of her family was getting sick, too. Emma, now 11, had her nose cauterized with acid three times to prevent the bleeding, Wendy Meng said. Paul Meng, 48, and daughter Kaleigh, 12, developed asthma.

During trips to the emergency room, Wendy noticed that her pain would often subside. Just a few hours out of the house was often all it took, she said.

"My husband could see it on my face," she said. "He could physically see the pain leave."

In January 2007, the company had the basement windows repaired, and Paul

Meng bought a home testing kit for mold and radon, on a hunch that air quality might be a factor, the Mengs said.

He sent the samples to a lab, which reported finding "unusual mold conditions." The couple then hired professionals to repeat the tests, with the same results. Drees was informed, and in February 2007, the company hired a contractor to do an inspection. The inspection turned up mold, and the contractor made recommendations for removing it.

The next month, the Mengs received a letter from Drees saying the company was not responsible for carrying out the recommendations, according to court papers filed by the Mengs. A Drees executive told Paul Meng that the illness was "all in your wife's head," Paul Meng said.

In April, Wendy Meng took a four-day trip to Williamsburg. Her headaches stopped completely, she

continued on page 25

## Sick House

Continued from page 24

said, and "the pain just lifted." When she returned home, the migraines quickly returned and the next weekend she was hospitalized again.

They had no choice but to move, the Mengs said.

Taking only their beds, a couch, a table, some teddy bears and clothes that had been dry cleaned, the family moved to a South Riding townhouse that April. The sickness continued, but to a lesser degree, they said. The mold had contaminated their possessions and had followed them to their new home, they later learned. They filed a lawsuit against Drees in Loudoun County Circuit Court that August.

"We kept on hoping that Drees was going to do the right thing," Wendy Meng said. "All we asked them to do was put us up somewhere while they got the house completely cleaned . . . and they wouldn't do it."

Paul Meng, who co-owns a company that automates systems in commercial buildings, said he never wanted it to go to court. "Court is the last resort. . . . We still trusted them. We had expected them to come through for us."

Last March, the Mengs went to see Ritchie Shoemaker, a doctor on Maryland's Eastern Shore who specializes in illnesses caused by water-damaged buildings. He said mold and other microbes in the

house had produced toxins that made the Mengs sick.

Shoemaker said their possessions had been contaminated, too, and the family threw away almost everything, including family photos, baptismal gowns and toys. "He said we had to get rid of everything we had," Wendy Meng said. "When we moved [again] . . . we didn't even bring a sock."

The Mengs moved to Aldie in March last year. In September, they went to a bio-detox center in South Carolina for about a month to remove toxins that had built up in their bodies. The children missed about a month of school, and "that's been challenging," Paul Meng said.

Among other treatments, the Mengs sat in 150-degree saunas for three hours a day.

"I felt like I got my life back," Wendy Meng said, though she and other family members still have problems. Paul and Kaleigh have asthma. Wendy and Kaleigh are on a daily regimen of oxygen treatments, and Wendy has painful muscle spasms in her neck and shoulders from time to time.

Chin S. Yang, a mycologist who testified as an expert witness in the trial, said that mold grows in houses when excessive moisture is present and that the problem became more common after drywall largely re-

placed plaster in home construction. He said the paper in drywall contains sugar polymers that can serve as food for organisms.

"What you have is [Drees] not using common sense," said David H. Wise, the Mengs' attorney. "They didn't supervise their subcontractors. . . . They didn't care when water intruded into the house during construction."

The Mengs still own the Chantilly house, but they said it would cost an estimated \$400,000 to remove the mold and make necessary repairs. They're not sure what to do with it, they said, and are reluctant to sell it for fear it would cause another family health problems.

The Mengs said problems with the house have cost them hundreds of thousands of dollars in medical expenses, legal fees, discarded furniture and other expenses. But they can be replaced.

"If you don't have your health," Wendy Meng said, "it doesn't matter what you have."



The Meng family in their rented Aldie home. From left to right, Paul, Kaleigh, 12, Emma, 11, and Wendy. (John McDonnell)