

**Jeffrey Almer**  
**Along with S.T.O.P.—Safe Tables Our Priority**

**Testimony before the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee of the  
Committee on Energy and Commerce  
United States House of Representatives**

**Salmonella Contamination  
February 11, 2009**

My name is Jeff Almer and I am here today on behalf of the family of Shirley Almer, my mother, and as a member of S.T.O.P.—Safe Tables Our Priority, a non-profit organization that represents food borne illness victims nationwide.

Shirley Almer had a lot of Sisu; which is what Finnish people call a person with spunk, fortitude and determination. That is why her death on December 21, 2008—from of all things, *Salmonella*-contaminated peanut butter—came as such a shock to our family.

In May of 2007 Mom had a couple dime-sized spots of cancer diagnosed on her right lung. She decided to have it removed at the University of Minnesota, and was subsequently diagnosed cancer free. She took a family trip to Florida a year later to celebrate with her children and grandchildren and it was such a joy to see her enjoying life and laughing after that terrible scare.

Then, in late July 2008, she suffered a seizure and was diagnosed with a brain tumor. The prognosis was hopeful and she was determined to do whatever it took to beat cancer for a second time. She underwent brain radiation. My brother, Mike, and I watched in horror as she suffered another seizure which caused some issues on her right side as well as swallowing and speech hardships. She was required to stay at the University hospital but fought back through rehab and regained the use of her limbs despite the diagnosis of some doctors. It was through sheer determination and a can-do attitude she overcame all that, never ever complaining. One of her wonderful rehab nurses told me she was a “shining light” and said she was amazed. Mom then had a treatment session with a gamma knife, which is a pinpoint precision procedure to zap the remaining cancer cells. She was released in early October to recuperate with our family and in late October she was once again declared “cancer free” by the University of MN.

Unfortunately, Mom contracted a urinary tract infection around Thanksgiving time where once again she needed to check in short-term to a rehab care facility in Brainerd for care and treatment. She couldn't wait to get home and even suggested getting a puppy from an acquaintance. Her short-term stay was supposed to end the Monday prior to Christmas when she would then join the family for the holidays. Unfortunately, she began to complain of stomach cramping and also had diarrhea. There was a downward spiral from that point. The family was absolutely stunned to learn that on the day before her scheduled release from the rehab facility, that doctors were giving her just hours to live. It was very unexpected and equally hard to fathom how she could possibly have gotten to this point. We ended up saying our tearful goodbyes and watching her last breaths on Sunday Dec 21. The holidays were non-existent and mattered little.

It was just after the New Year that my sister Ginger was informed by the Minnesota Department of Health about the positive test for *Salmonella*. A week or so earlier she had unknowingly consumed *Salmonella*-laced peanut butter while in her immune compromised state of health. Cancer couldn't claim her but peanut butter did.

Now that we understood the cause of her death our grief was replaced by anger as we struggled to accept this very preventable tragedy. Our family feels cheated. My mom should be with us today. My mother, Shirley, was a proud mother, a proud businesswoman, and a proud American. She fought hard for the things she believed in. She always liked to fly the US flag along with the Finnish flag, which was her heritage. If it was one of her kids who passed away from *Salmonella*-tainted food, or one of the many other contaminants present in our food supply these days, there is no doubt that she would be as outraged as I am today. She would be doing the same thing her family is doing in her memory right now: telling her story in order to effect change.

Her death and the deaths of seven others could have been so easily prevented if it were not for the greed and avarice of the Peanut Corporation Of America (PCA). PCA appears to be more concerned with squeezing every dollar possible at the expense of sanitary conditions and sound food manufacturing processes. Every company should have a moral and ethical compass when producing the nation's food supply. In this absence, we need a cohesive proactive regulatory system to serve as our safety net; too often it is reactive, if at all.

PCA now has the blood of eight victims on their hands, along with the shattered health of a known 600 others. Their legacy is now that of a company that did what it could get away with until their shoddy practices led to one of the nation's largest recalls.

Shirley Almer loved this country but was terribly let down by a broken and ineffective food safety system. She was let down in the worst possible way by the very government whose responsibility it is to protect its citizens. We cannot continue to ignore the public health threat caused by poorly regulated and contaminated foods. We cannot allow food safety to be continually under funded and expose unsuspecting Americans to deadly pathogens. We need strong laws, regulations, and effective enforcement enacted to protect our families.

Here are some of the key points that an effective revamped system should include:

- A food safety system that is prevention based with companies being mandated to have validated process controls.
- Development and enforcement of mandated performance standards with companies facing stiff penalties for non-compliance.
- Increased inspection by the federal government with less reliance on states policing the same companies that they wish to promote.
- Increased lab capacity in order to diagnose foodborne illness cases faster and not have a back-up at state labs.
- Adequately staffing the PulseNet system so that it can be better used for faster detections, allowing it to become a more active system instead of a passive system.
- Mandatory recall authority for the government regulatory agencies.
- Traceability of ingredients and products.

The government and the industry need to work together to correct a multitude of problems. I am proud to be asking for change on behalf of my mother, Shirley, and on behalf of S.T.O.P.—Safe Tables Our Priority. Although this country has many important issues right now, I am urging President Obama and the distinguished members of Congress to make the safety of our nation's food supply a top priority. It is imperative that Americans can trust that their health is not compromised by the food on their plate.

Jeff Almer

Brothers: Michael, Patrick

Sisters: Ginger, Vickie

Grandkids: Isaac, Madeline, Shelby, Shanice