

ARTICLE SAMPLE

This story/article was written by Jen Viano for STOP Foodborne Illness' July 2013 e-newsletter.

Deadly Dinner at a Favorite Restaurant Causes Heartbreaking Loss for Ploghoff Family

Alone.

That's the overwhelming feeling that Dr. Milton Ploghoff has had since losing his wife, Zella, to food poisoning.

It was April 30, 2010 when Milton, Zella and their son, Phil, were happy to finally be seated for a family meal at



their favorite Mexican restaurant in Athens, Ohio. It was a busy day as families across town celebrated Ohio University's Parents Day. Eating establishments were crowded.

The 30-minute wait at their favorite place almost prompted a decision to change venues. But, they decided the wait would be worth it.

It proved to be a fatal choice.

The next morning, Zella and Phil, who shared a special dinner for two, became seriously ill. They experienced violent, painful spells of vomiting and diarrhea. By noon, Zella was so weak that she couldn't hold the phone during a talk with daughter, Tara, who always called on Saturday morning to catch up.

Worried and frightened, Milton called 911.

Zella was getting worse, now unable to even get out of her chair. Phil had become weak, too, and wasn't able to help care for his mother.

Although Phil thankfully recovered, that wasn't the case for Zella.

When 911 responders rushed Zella to the hospital on May 1, 2010, it marked the beginning of a 7-week-long battle with foodborne illness that tragically took Zella's life on June 22, 2010.

The reason?

The waiter at Zella's favorite restaurant served up more than just her favorite meal. Zella—along with 30 other patrons who dined there that day—received food contaminated with *Salmonella*.

Hurried Food Workers Hold Lives in Their Hands

When a restaurant is busy and food workers feel pressure to get food out to impatient patrons, food safety is put at risk.

And that's why Zella is no longer spending her days with Milton, Phil and the rest of the family who loved her so dearly.

That fateful day, their favorite restaurant was packed. During their investigation, the local county health department determined that the 30 patrons who contracted *Salmonella* got it from undercooked food—a result of food workers rushing to get food out as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, this is a scenario that plays out in restaurants across the nation with unacceptable frequency.

A death like Zella's didn't need to happen. It was completely preventable.

And Milton is helping to make sure that people like you and your family members don't suffer the same way.

An Activist is Born

Shortly after Zella's passing, Milton found out about STOP Foodborne Illness and signed up for STOP's e-Alerts with food recall and outbreak information.

As he learned more about STOP's mission to prevent foodborne illness, he became inspired. Although he was enduring terrible pain and loss, he was buoyed by learning about others who shared similar struggles and who were doing important work to improve food safety.

Unwilling to sit back and accept the status quo, Milton made a decision: In Zella's memory, he would make it his mission to help improve food safety for all of us who sit down to enjoy meals at our favorite restaurants.

His biggest concerns are twofold:

First, the inadequacy of state and local boards in monitoring food safety practices due to lack of funding for personnel. Second, the general lack of interest and concern for food safety by people serving food to patrons.

To help in these areas, Milton is working on a food safety initiative aimed at the millions of untrained "casual" workers in the nation's food service industry. With some collaboration with STOP, he's been working on producing and distributing an online video to reach these workers.

"I'm very serious and passionate about this work. With involvement and support from all stakeholders including boards of health, legislators, culinary educators, restaurant owner-operators and advocates, I know we can do much more to prevent foodborne illness at restaurants and eating establishments across the U.S."

A Painful Loss That Was Preventable

Although Milton keeps busy devoting considerable time to his strong interest in African educational research and diversity as an essential part of American education, he misses Zella more than words can say.

"Zella was a vital and very special part of our family. We all miss her. I've found her loss so difficult to compensate for," says Milton.

Family gatherings, sharing time together and special trips—like the one of Milton with Zella above taken on a Puerto Rican vacation one year before her passing—are simply not the same for Milton without Zella.

The saddest part is that Zella didn't have to die from *Salmonella*-tainted food served to her that day. If those food workers had taken just a few more minutes cooking her food, Zella would still be with Milton and her family today.

"For STOP's readers, I urge them to become (or continue to be) food safety conscious for themselves and their families every time they enter a food serving business," cautions Milton.

"Take note of the cleanliness and health of workers. And please be mindful of how long waiting lines can affect the food you're served. A busy restaurant could prove to be a deadly one, as it was in Zella's case."

If you want to reach out to Milton send a kind word or share your thoughts about foodborne illness, Milton welcomes you to email him at ploghoff@ohio.edu.

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU

Do you have a story you'd like to share with STOP and our readers?

Stories of people affected by foodborne illness are a favorite among our readers. If you've got one you'd like to share to help educate and inspire fellow food safety advocates, please contact Stanley Rutledge, Program Director, at srutledge@stopfoodbornillness.org to let us know and take next steps.

Jen Viano

Nonprofit Writer/Consultant

Jen Viano Communications

C: 248.703.9297

O: 248.957.8918

Jen@JenViano.com

www.JenViano.com