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Neighbors

An historic victory for Yannacone

by Joe Flammer

The lawsuit that Patchogue attorney Victor J. Yannacone initiated against a conglomerate of chemical companies in 1979, on behalf of a single combat veteran exposed to the toxic herbicide Agent Orange in the fields and jungles of Vietnam, resulted in unanimous votes by the House of Representatives and the Senate to pass the "Agent Orange Act" last week.

In 1983, Yannacone, who is still involved with a class action suit against the chemical companies on behalf of veterans, handed over the original case he began to other lawyers who had more funds at their disposal, he said. But the upward climb for combat veterans to receive the recognition they deserve, by being awarded money and health benefits to provide for themselves and their families due to inexplicable illnesses they brought home from Vietnam, started in an office in Patchogue.

Under the terms of the new Act, Vietnam veterans who suffer from non-Hodgkins lymphoma, soft tissue sarcomas, as well as the skin condition chloracne, will receive permanent disability benefits.

In addition, the bill extends through 1993 health care eligibility for veterans with disabilities related to herbicide exposure or ionizing radiation, according to a news release from Congressman George Hochbrueckner (D-Coram). Who co-sponsored the bill.



Patchogue attorney Victor J. Yannacone holding "molecule of death."

Previous legislation also benefited veterans exposed to Agent Orange and other toxic chemicals used in Vietnam, including a settlement fund for veterans and their survivors.

"I started the lawsuit right here in Patchogue," the 54-year-old Yannacone recalled one day after the U.S. Senate passed the Agent Orange Law. "This is the first step toward complete vindication for the veterans and their families."

He started the lawsuit with the idea

that chemical companies were covering up information about the extent of damage caused to humans by the chemical dioxin, which he said is found in Agent Orange.

Yannacone calls the molecule dioxin "the Molecule of Death." Hundreds of grim books on the shelves in his law office attest to his knowledge of chemical related diseases.

In the mid '80s, Yannacone drew

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An historic victory for Yannacone

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local attention when he spread the word of the "flat" molecule that "slips" into the DNA structure of humans and destroys human immunity systems to Yaphank and Brookhaven Hamlet residents, when he was hired by the Town of Brookhaven to fight a state proposal to locate a regional ashfill at the town's landfill on Horseblock Road. He claiming that the "fly ash" resulting from burned garbage contained the same molecules as found in Agent Orange.

Yannacone said he can remember the day in 1946 when his father took he and his family from Brooklyn to the "end of the line" on Long Island Railroad to find a house in which to live.

Upon walking down Baker Street, which is the first street the family walked, his father noticed a house for sale. It turned out to be the house in which he and his father, also an attorney, would practice law, he said. It is still the location of Yannacone's law office.

A graduate of Brooklyn Law School, Yannacone can remember having to hitchhike to Port Jefferson High School, from which he eventually graduated. He said an outstanding feature of Patchogue is that, "we were the first community that accommodated mixed racial and ethnic groups with justice and tolerance."

"It's a nice place to live," Yannacone said of Patchogue. "And it can get better. I believe the future of Patchogue is that it will be a home for professional

activities and many of the kind of commercial and business activities located in Manhattan.

When does Yannacone foresee the end to his fight against chemical companies who made Agent Orange? "When the last veteran dies," he said. "When justice is done and the last veterans are recognized and compensated. So that the last veteran can say on his death bed that his country remembered him and his family."