

July 2, 2017

SunSentinel



Florida native says chemical sensitivity forced him to leave state

Ashlee Bell speaks about her father Alan Bell's book, "Poisoned."

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Alan Bell is returning to the “ground zero” of his life and career — and of the condition he says almost killed him.

The writer, activist and former Broward County prosecutor said he had to leave Florida to fight for his life, after being diagnosed with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity, a condition in which the person has severe sensitivity to different kinds of pollutants.

ADVERTISING

Bell, 62, is back to speak about his journey during two July signings for his book, “Poisoned: How a Crime-Busting Prosecutor Turned His Medical Mystery into a Crusade for Environmental Victims” (Skyhorse Publishing; \$25.99). He was at a Barnes & Noble in Fort Lauderdale on July 1 and will be at Books and Books in Coral Gables on July 11.

The Barnes & Noble event is a “Meet the Authors” that also will feature Ronald L. Feinman (“Assassinations, Threats, and the American Presidency: From Andrew Jackson to Barack Obama”), Kingsley Guy (“Queen of the Heavens”) and Bobby F. Kimbrough Jr. (“Beyond Midnight: Finding Strength in the Struggle”).

Bell’s book relates his growing up in South Florida, battling his condition and advocating for others. After earning a law degree from the University of Miami, he started his career at the State Attorney’s Office and enjoyed success. He was married, had a baby girl and an active life. Life was great, he said, but everything changed when he got sick.

All of a sudden, Bell could not get out of bed. He was dizzy and weak. He eventually could not walk due to seizures. Doctors were stunned and didn’t know the cause. They combed through his life, he said, looking for answers, and asked him if he could think of anyone who might have had a motive to poison him.

In a 1993 [Sun Sentinel](#) interview, he said: “I was a prosecutor putting prisoners in jail. Now I’m imprisoned by my own body.”

Though some in the medical community agree that multiple chemical sensitivity is a negative physical reaction to chemicals, there is debate as to whether it should be diagnosed as an illness, according to Johns Hopkins Medicine.

Bell said doctors urged him to leave Florida, so he moved to a toxin-free “bubble” in the Arizona desert to try to stay healthy and look for better ways to live. He eventually relocated to Capistrano Beach, Calif.



Today, Alan Bell, 62, lives in Capistrano Beach, Calif. (Alan Bell / Courtesy)

In 1994, he founded the Environmental Health Foundation to raise awareness about his condition and communicate with scientists to better understand and fight environmental-linked disorders.

In advance of his book signings, we caught up with Bell to discuss his life today, his memories of Florida and his legacy.

Q: What does a typical day look like for you today?

A: I'm very regimented and guarded in what I can do and how I can do it. I live a very clean, safe lifestyle, which means that I can't do a lot of things that other people are used to. I can in limited capacities, but I always go back to the safe environment and healthy lifestyle.

I get calls from people all over the world. China. India. Norway. Canada. People that either themselves have fallen ill, or their loved ones have fallen ill. In some instances, mothers who want to protect themselves and their families from becoming another statistic. I also keep in touch with scientists who are keeping me abreast on the latest of what is going on with this planet and people getting sick and dying. Speaking in front of as many groups as I can to

put a face on this issue and try and educate people so that they can modify their lifestyle and minimize their risk ... The reality is 80 percent of all cancers are caused by the environment you are exposed to, in your home, school, workplace or community.

Q: What are your best memories of Florida?

A: Back in the '60s, there were no computers. People didn't watch TV. You'd ride your bike everywhere. Everybody had garage bands trying to imitate The Beatles. We lived at the tip of the Florida Everglades, so my dad used to take us, rent a boat and ride on the little canals and see alligators. Everything was outdoors. In elementary school, we didn't have air conditioners. We didn't know any better. South Florida was like a big hometown. "Leave it to Beaver." "Dennis the Menace." That's how it was. It was an amazing time to grow up.

Q: Why did you want to go into law and become a prosecutor?

A: It ties back into South Florida in the 1960s. It was the deep south. You didn't hear a lot of New Yorkers. You didn't hear a lot of accents. You heard a lot of good ol' boys. That's the South Florida that I grew up in, which was highly segregated ... Separate bathrooms. Back of the bus. As a child, my mother pointed these things out to me. She always taught me that it's wrong for these things to happen. To fight for the underdog and try and make wrongs right. Try and seek justice.

Q: What do you hope your legacy is?

A: I learned how to take control of my life in becoming a survivor, and then I jumped back into the arena as a health advocate, aligning myself with scientists, raising money and donating it to research. I went back to the arena that I was most familiar with —the legal arena for victims who have fallen ill. When I look into victims' eyes, I see a mirror of myself. I see the fear and the

hopelessness. Many of them have nowhere else to turn. They couldn't find any medical or legal help.

In this country, there's a general rule that any chemicals are presumed innocent until proven guilty. What that means is that you could bring in chemicals from all parts of the world ... and you could sell it to people until it's been proven that it's harmful for human health. As a result of that, chemicals have been introduced into our environment since 1950, and few have been tested for the toxic effect on humans. Here I was working in a justice system where a man is presumed innocent until otherwise proven guilty, and I, as a prosecutor, had to prove that person guilty in order for him to be held accountable for the deeds that he had done. It's ironic that now I'm thrown into the other arena with the environment, and I see the same thing. This is a chemical that is presumed innocent. There's a real irony there.

Alan Bell will be signing his book at two events: 2-4 p.m. July 1 at Barnes & Noble, 2051 N. Federal Highway, Fort Lauderdale (954-561-3732, stores.barnesandnoble.com); and 7-9 p.m. July 11 at Books & Books, 265 Aragon Ave., Coral Gables (305-442-4408, booksandbooks.com). Both events are free and open to the public.

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