

First Landmark case in US  
alleging mold exposure causes  
Parkinson Disease

Alan Bell represents former Olympic  
CEO suing landlord and multi-state  
property management company

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## Downfall of an Ironman: Former USA Triathlon chief believes black mold led to devastating illness

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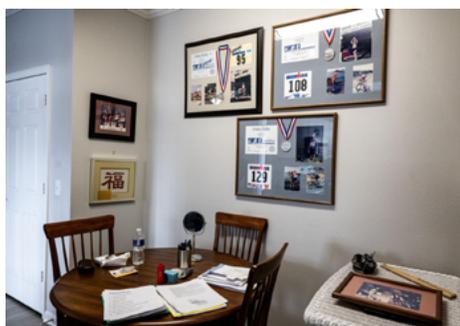
*Linda Kilis kneels to help her husband, Steve Locke, put on his shoes before leaving his apartment in January. For most of his life, Locke, 78, was a paragon of health and fitness, a career executive with the U.S. Olympic Committee who embraced athletics just as enthusiastically off the clock. But in 2014, a cascade of health issues emerged, followed shortly by a diagnosis of Parkinson's. Parker Seibold, The Gazette*

# DOWNFALL OF AN IRONMAN

Former USA Triathlon chief believes black mold led to his devastating illness

Steve Locke was a paragon of health and fitness, a career executive with the U.S. Olympic Committee who embraced athletics just as enthusiastically off the clock.

“He’d be out there at the crack of dawn, riding his bike in Garden of the Gods,” said Locke’s wife, Linda Kilis. “He did Ironman in Hawaii eight times. He wasn’t just head of USA Triathlon, he was an accomplished triathlete.”



*Memorabilia from Steve Locke’s days competing in triathlons hang in his kitchen above a table hosting a breathing treatment and speech therapy documents. Parker Seibold, The Gazette*

In 2014, a cascade of health issues emerged to stop his life in its tracks.

The man who addressed crowds without a mic, who The Gazette styled as a real-life superman in a 1999 profile about his personal and professional feats, struggled to walk across the room or finish a sentence without losing his breath.

In 2015, came the diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease.

“I’m embarrassed,” Locke said in early February, his voice reduced to a raspy whisper and his gaze refusing to drop to the hands clasped in his lap, muscles wracked by the uncontrollable tremors he knows will only get worse.

“This isn’t who I was,” said Locke, 78. “This isn’t who I am.”

Locke and Kilis believe years of exposure to “toxic mold” is to blame for Locke’s Parkinson’s, as well as a host of symptoms that first appeared in the couple and their now-15-year-old son soon after they rented an apartment on the west side of Colorado Springs in 2014.



*Linda Kilis and Steve Locke pose for a portrait outside The Signature at Promontory Pointe Apartments in January. The pair say “toxic mold” that was discovered inside Locke’s apartment at the complex is to blame for the decline of their health. Parker Seibold, the Gazette*

Locke and Kilis set out to prove their claims in court, filing suit in 2022 against the landlord and property owner after hiring Florida-based lawyer Alan Bell, whose own experience with exposure to environmental toxins led him to focus on environmental cases with catastrophic injuries.

Bell said in January that he believed the claims and connections put forth in the case were of national significance, with the potential to set precedents on multiple fronts. Perhaps most importantly, he said, they could raise awareness about the risks of mold exposure, and studies that implicate it in a growing catalog of neurodegenerative diseases.

“The numbers of Parkinson’s cases are exploding, doubling every 25 years. And new scientific studies show that 85% of Parkinson’s is caused by environmental exposure in our everyday lives,” Bell said then. “This landmark legal case in Colorado Springs is the first in the U.S. alleging that mold exposure causes Parkinson’s disease.”

It’s also a story of one family’s descent into, and through, personal tragedy.

“You’ve got a hometown hero, a triathlete, an Ironman, a superman, and this has ruined his life, his wife’s life, and their kid has been traumatized. Basically, he is losing his father,” Bell said. “Other than cases where a death has occurred, this is one of the most egregious and horrible outcomes of mold exposure I’ve ever seen.”

The uphill battle began in the hidden, dank corners of the brightest of lives.

## Mysterious ailments emerge

Steve Locke and Linda Kilis met in the 1990s through their work at the Springs-based U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC), where Kilis was associate director of brand management and Locke was partway through a 13-year tenure as CEO of USA Triathlon, before moving on to head USA Water Ski and USA Field Hockey.

“We both loved our jobs. We were both workaholics. We postponed having a child for a very long time because we were so devoted to our careers,” said Kilis, 59, in a January interview with The Gazette. “Luckily, we were able to eke out a son in the nick of time.”

Things were going good, and partly in a bid to keep it that way, Locke secured a lease on a small apartment nearby at The Signature at Promontory Point Apartments on the Springs' west side managed by Griffis Blessing.

"We were still together, but we just kind of needed our space," said Kilis, who has been married to her husband for 27 years. "We kind of treated that like a second home. In fact, we spent most of our time there, just hanging out, watching Netflix, playing games. It really was an extension of our home here. A nice cozy place to be."

Several months in, though, mysterious ailments began to emerge.

Before the apartment, Kilis said she, her husband and son were all in perfect health. Their free time was a portfolio of outdoor adventures and travels, including a family trip to the 2012 Summer Olympics in London.



*Steve Locke, Linda Kilis and their young son in better times, attending the 2012 Summer Olympics in London. Courtesy photo*

"I would check the 'excellent' box off when I had my annual physicals, and joke about wasting their time, and 'I'll see you next year,'" Kilis said.

Symptoms manifested first in Locke. The legs that had propelled him countless miles over land and through water seemed like they'd forgotten how to walk.

"His gait was just off. It was awk-

ward for him to walk, and when he did it was like his arms didn't swing properly," said Kilis. An initial MRI showed nothing out of the ordinary, but after Locke developed tremors the following year, further tests led to an official diagnosis of Parkinson's disease, a degenerative disorder of the nervous system that has no cure and for which he had no genetic predisposition.

A few months after Locke's symptoms began, the couple's 5-year-old son started exhibiting verbal and motor tics.

"As a mom, it was just hard to see that and not know how to help him," said Kilis.

By 2015, Kilis herself could no longer check the "excellent" box on annual health questionnaires.

She said she felt as though her immune system had been "thrown off a cliff."

A lifelong fan of perfume, known to gift her husband aftershave on special occasions, Kilis said a sudden onset of multiple chemical sensitivity made all scents, good or bad, anathema.

"I couldn't tolerate any smells. You don't realize how ubiquitous fragrances are in our lives," she said. "Even somebody sitting next to me with fabric softener on their clothes causes my breathing to become restricted. My throat tightens up, my lips go numb and start tingling, and my ears feel like they're burning."

Every exposure is another hit to an already battered immune system.

"It prevented me from being able to go back to work," she said.

For years, as their symptoms worsened, Kilis said she thought all the bad health was just bad health luck.

"All three of us have immune dysfunction. All three of us were diagnosed with a vocal cord dys-

function," Kilis said. "I mean, what are the odds?"

## 'Environment pulls the trigger'

In December 2020, snowmelt led to an active leak inside the bedroom of Locke's apartment, which in turn led to the discovery of years' worth of mold, mildew and structural decay spreading behind the walls and floors, according to the allegations in the suit.



*An image showing decay and mold from water damage, inside the walls of Steve Locke's Colorado Springs apartment. Courtesy of Steve Loke and Linda Kilis*

Kilis said she remembers lifting a large, framed painting from its hook on the wall.

"Behind it was just covered with mold. And we'd been breathing that in, eating it on our food, for years," she said. "We didn't really know the extent of it at that point. It was only later, when they had to do a demolition of that room, that we discovered it was rotted out behind the walls, behind the ceiling ... the subflooring was so rotted it would just break away."

At the time, the extent of her knowledge of mold was that it was "bad."

Over months of research, and the accumulation of medical papers, research and studies that now choke multiple banker's boxes, she learned how bad.

"They say genetics loads the gun

and the environment pulls the trigger when it comes to neurodegenerative diseases including Parkinson's," she said. "Well, it pulled the trigger three times with us."

Her research ultimately brought her to Bell, and a community of survivors, advocates and legislators pushing for big-picture changes, tenant protections and greater awareness in Colorado.

"One thing people should know is that mold doesn't always emit a smell that people can detect," Kilis said. "And you can't just pour bleach on it and paint over it, which is what some people consider 'remediation.' That doesn't make it go away, and could make it worse."

## ‘Conflicting opinions’

Mold is everywhere, and not all versions are bad (see: penicillin). Where things get problematic is when it appears and is allowed to flourish in the enclosed spaces where we live and breathe.

Certain types produce a toxin that is known to be harmful if ingested, inhaled, or absorbed through the skin by humans and animals. Just how toxic depends on who you ask and which reports they turn to.

One often-quoted study from 2017 attributed the proliferation of toxic mold awareness and symptoms to media hype, questioning a connection between mold and ailments beyond allergic reactions and breathing issues among those with preexisting sensitivities.

"There is no evidence of a link between autoimmune disease and mold exposure," concluded the authors of "Mold and Human Health: a Reality Check."

Bell pushed back on such conclusions, saying in January that he planned to present expert testimo-

ny and studies showing not only a link between mold mycotoxins and neurodegenerative diseases in humans but also recent studies that found it can trigger Parkinson's in mice.

Mold litigation has led to multi-million-dollar awards for plaintiffs who've successfully made the case for toxic exposure and proven a link between their health complaints and negligent property managers or owners who allowed mold conditions to arise, and fester.

But tenant protections, and legal perspectives, vary from state to state.

"We'll understand this better as time goes on, but because the medical science is not really settled, and there are conflicting opinions of what the ramifications of exposure can be ... we're really not at a place where that is something that can be easily proved in court, from an injury standpoint," said state Rep. Amy Paschal, co-sponsor of a bill recently introduced in the legislature aimed at addressing mold exposure from an awareness angle. The bill includes a "Mold Awareness and Registration Act," but no new language that would exert more outside pressure or penalties.

Paschal said she hopes the bill can serve as an introductory step, leading to more legislation, with more teeth, down the road.

"We know plenty now and we can act on the things we do know about. At the very least, educate people," she said. "That's always a good place to start."

The bill originated under the tenure of former state Rep. Steph Vigil, of Colorado Springs, and was inspired in part by the experiences of Steve Locke and Linda Kilis.

Kilis served as an adviser during its crafting, Paschal said.

"This is the kind of situation, where, if anyone puts themselves in their place — you end up in a situation where you become ill, where you don't really have any recourse, where you can file a lawsuit, but it's a difficult thing to prove — it's really terrifying," Paschal said.

Requirements for mold cleanup, disclosure of its discovery, or a guarantee of its remediation to current and future tenants, fall under something of a gray area in current state landlord-tenant law.

"These other legal remedies are in place, but unlike the heat not working or a broken window, what constitutes as having thoroughly eliminated the mold isn't clearly defined," said Vigil.

In Colorado, as in many states, a lawsuit is currently the only recourse for tenants who believe negligence led to the exposure that ruined their home, and their health.

Civil litigation is not easy, or cheap. Expert witness testimonies alone run into the multiple thousands of dollars, and attorneys rarely take such cases on retainer.

Which means: If you lose, you pay your own legal costs, and sometimes that of the defendant.

"I think a lot of people have this idea that since landlords have certain obligations to their tenants, and it's the law, that there must be somebody they can complain to," Vigil said. "But the only real lever of accountability in this section of statute is private action."

Some of Linda Kilis' and her sons' symptoms have improved since they moved from the mold-ridden apartment in 2020.



*An assortment of medication, vitamins and supplements sit on Steve Locke's counter. Parker Seibold, the Gazette*

Not so for Locke.

The kitchen counter of his new apartment in Colorado Springs is stacked with medications, and the erstwhile superman needs help pulling on his shoes and socks.

"We don't go anywhere," Locke said, "except for doctor's appointments."

Three days before a scheduled trial date in late February, Bell confirmed to The Gazette that Steve Locke and Linda Kilis had agreed to a settlement offer, which concluded the case and came with a nondisclosure agreement barring all parties from any further discussion of details.

The defense's legal team cited that agreement, as well, declining to comment about the case or terms of the settlement when reached by The Gazette last week.

On the eve of the settlement, Kilis said she planned to keep speaking out about the dangers of mold and pushing for changes in tenant protection laws — for her family, and yours.

"What hurts the most is our son missed out on a lot of experiences he would have had. His dad looked forward to teaching him how to ski, going hiking and camping and just all of the things that Parkinson's has now prevented him from being able to do," said Kilis before the settlement. "I plan to do whatever I can to keep another family from having to go through what we're going through."

## Link to Original Article

<https://www.denverpost.com/2025/01/27/mold-exposure-parkinsons-disease-colorado-springs-lawsuit/?share=osea-2c7isswsvwesnpom>

## Alan Bell's Official Website

[www.alanbell.me](http://www.alanbell.me)