

PEOPLE

An Angel's Rainbows

BY MIKE MAGNER

The largest water-contamination case in U.S. history might never have become public absent **Jerry Ensminger's** undying love for his daughter Janey, who died at age 9 in 1985 after battling a rare form of leukemia for more than two years.

Janey had been conceived at Camp Lejeune, N.C., at a time when the sprawling Marine Corps base—the largest on the East Coast—was exposing thousands of military personnel and their families to highly carcinogenic chemicals in its water supply.

It wasn't until 1997, after a dozen years of agonizing over Janey's inexplicable death, that Ensminger had an indication of its cause. As he was sitting down for dinner in front of the television at his home near Camp Lejeune, Ensminger heard a news report about water pollution on the base that may have affected more than 1 million people over several decades.

In a new documentary, *Semper Fi: Always Faithful*, premiering in the Washington area this week—including a special screening on Capitol Hill on Thursday (see *Hot Ticket*, page 22)—Ensminger describes how the moment led to a crusade for justice, not just for Janey but for all the victims of Lejeune's poisoned water.

After he cleaned up the dinner plate that had crashed to the floor when he heard the report, Ensminger was overwhelmed by the realization that the Marine Corps he had loyally served for more than 24 years might have been responsible for the death of the girl he called his angel.

"It was like God saying to me, here is a glimmer of hope that you will find your answer," he says in the film.

Ensminger, who turns 59 on the Fourth of July, joined the Marines right out of high school near Hershey, Pa., after his older brother Dave was severely wounded in Vietnam. He was a drill instructor at Parris Island, S.C., and did tours in Okinawa, Japan, and at other U.S. bases, including 11 years off and on at Camp Lejeune.

Janey was one of three daughters Ensminger and his then-wife, a native of Okinawa, had while living on or near the base, although she was the only child conceived, carried or born there. Little did they know their water was tainted by hazardous chemicals from fuels and cleaning solvents that had been spilled by military operations over the years and had leached through the sandy soil into the camp's groundwater.



Relentless: Retired Marine Corps Master Sgt. Jerry Ensminger



The angel: Janey Ensminger

When the story about the pollution came out, Ensminger was certain that the Marine Corps would take care of its own, in keeping with its "Semper Fidelis," or "Always Faithful," motto. He was sorely disappointed.

Semper Fi, by New York directors Rachel Libert and Tony Hardmon, tells the story of Ensminger's quest, now in its 14th year, to track down victims of the pollution, link their deaths and diseases to exposure on the base, and force the Marine Corps to be held accountable for their care.

Aided by other former Marines and family members who lived on the base, Ensminger's group—dubbed "the Few, the Proud, the Forgotten"—has uncovered thousands of documents, instigated numerous investigations, and prompted congressional hearings and legislative proposals to require compensation for victims of Camp Lejeune's contamination.

All along the way, Ensminger says, the Marine Corps has stonewalled; and the federal agencies responsible for protecting public health, including the National Academy of Sciences, have been overpowered by well-heeled lawyers for the military and the chemical industry, fearful that linking contaminants to illnesses and deaths will lead to billions of dollars in liability exposure.

"Our legal system has been completely turned upside down," he said in an interview last week. "They can say, 'We poisoned you, and now you have to prove that it was our pollution that harmed you.'"

One thing keeps Ensminger going and that's the memory of his daughter's words just days before her death on September 24, 1985, at the Duke University Children's Hospital and Health Center.

"Every time you see a rainbow, Daddy, it'll be me," Janey told her father. ■