

To: Ms. Maryam Sanati, Editor-in-chief, Chatelaine
Ms. Patricia Pearson, Writer

Re: Chatelaine article “It’s just nuts”

I hope you received the “*Sabrina’s Law*” documentary about my daughter who died in 2003 at the age of 13 after suffering a fatal allergic reaction. I sent two copies a couple of weeks ago, to the attention of Ms. Sanati, after reading the article “*It’s just nuts*” which was in the December issue of Chatelaine magazine. I was completely disheartened by the lack of empathy, sarcastic tone, ridiculous comparisons, and missing facts. I was especially concerned that readers would be left with the impression that the piece was well-researched and painted an accurate picture of what’s going on in Canadian schools and the wider community. It is far from the truth. You say that “schools and parents are cowering in fear” yet in my travels across North America, I have seen schools working together to keep all children safe.

I wish you had known my beautiful daughter, Sabrina, and I wish I were writing to you today for another reason. Instead, I am writing in hope that you will join me in keeping my promise to my daughter: to educate. While she was on life-support, I told Sabrina that I would do everything possible to prevent a similar tragedy from happening to another family or child.



Had my daughter been alive today, and read “*It’s just nuts*”, she too, like many of your readers, would have been dismayed by such a heartless article. She would have been very disappointed by the adults who wrote and published this piece. She would have told you that children deserve the support of their communities. At the tender age of 10, Sabrina made a radio documentary for CBC Outfront with my sister, Kathleen Whelan, called “*A nutty tale*”. Please listen to it - http://www.cbc.ca/outfront/webfeatures/sabrina/sab_shell.html

You will hear the voice of a creative and knowledgeable youngster using humour, not mockery, to advocate for those at risk of anaphylaxis. It has been listened to around the world and used as a teaching tool. You can tell from her voice that Sabrina did not let her allergies define her, though she did work hard to self-protect and teach others. Today, she may have been a talented writer contributing articles to Chatelaine magazine.

Ms. Pearson is correct in suggesting that peanut allergy has had greater attention from schools and the public in general. This is due to the fact that peanut is one of the most common causes of allergic reactions and death from anaphylaxis. It is also one of the most reported allergies within the school system. Ask any principal. While I agree that more needs to be done to educate the public about other food allergens, “*It’s just nuts*” failed in its attempt to provide any clarity around food allergy, a complex health issue. In fact, it did more to confuse your readers. The article suggests that food allergies are a myth and there is “over-blown panic” within the community; that parents and schools are “over-reacting” in their efforts to protect kids with food allergies. It is easy to be an armchair critic about the way others manage a health condition when you do not live with it 24/7. While my daughter ended up being one of the few who died from an allergic reaction, my hope is that you’ll see her as more than just a statistic.

Mother-to-mother, let me share Sabrina’s story.

Sabrina’s death from anaphylaxis, while rare, has nothing to do with death from lightning strikes. I found this comparison hugely offensive and ask that you please be considerate of people who have lost children as a result of anaphylaxis. As mothers yourselves, I hope that you would both understand how awful it is to lose a precious child. I cannot describe the devastation that Sabrina’s death caused to my family, her many friends, and her classmates who witnessed the horror of seeing their friend die. Sabrina was my only child.

Unlike lightning strikes, anaphylaxis is not an unpredictable force of nature. Prevention and safety plans can and should be put in place. Knowledge goes a long way to keeping children safe and they have the right to be safe and feel safe while at school. That is what *Sabrina’s Law* is about. I remember feeling very strongly after Sabrina’s death

that if all of the right measures had been in place – epinephrine, emergency preparedness and, 911 – maybe she would be alive today. My sentiments were echoed by Dr. Andrew McCallum, then Regional Supervising Coroner for Eastern Ontario, who sent recommendations to the schools in Eastern Ontario.

Ms. Pearson, my daughter (like most food-allergic kids) knew enough not to “lick her desk” but that peanut and other food particles could trigger a reaction if there was a transfer of residue from hand to mouth or from a utensil. The day she died, she ate plain French fries thought to be safe, which had been contaminated by a small amount of dairy not visible to the eye. Tongs which had been used to serve her fries had previously been used to serve French fries with poutine. Without early treatment with epinephrine, her allergic reaction to dairy escalated quickly, causing her throat to close and shut off oxygen to her brain. She was unconscious within minutes. After a day on life-support at the Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario, Sabrina died, surrounded by people who loved her very much. My worst nightmare had come true.

As the author of “*It’s Just Nuts*” Ms. Pearson, you hold the power of the pen to share your views as a freelance writer. Please use it responsibly. Ms. Sanati, as the Editor-in-chief of Chatelaine, you have the ability to reach millions of people with the right facts, by choosing what goes into print. Instead of creating controversy, let’s try to build bridges, not walls.

I am sharing my letter with Sabrina’s father, Mike Shannon, and the many others I have had the privilege of meeting since Sabrina’s death. These individuals have made efforts to improve management plans in schools, create safer products and environments for those at risk of anaphylaxis, and increase public awareness. They are school communities, politicians (Premier Dalton McGuinty, Kathleen Wynne, Minister of Education, Cheryl Gallant, MP Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke, Gerard Kennedy, MP Parkdale-High Park (former Ontario Education Minister), Dave Levac, MPP Brant, John Yakabuski, MPP Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke); government representatives (Health Canada, Canadian Food Inspection Agency, and Veterans Affairs Canada); the allergy and medical community (Canadian Society of Allergy and Clinical Immunology, AllerGen, Anaphylaxis Canada, Allergy/Asthma Information Association, Association québécoise des allergies alimentaires, Canadian MedicAlert Foundation, Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network, Food Allergy Initiative/Robert Kennedy Jr., *Allergic Living* magazine, Niagara Anaphylaxis Support & Knowledge and other local support groups, CHEO); industry (King Pharmaceuticals Canada, Paladin Labs, food manufacturers, Canadian Peanut Bureau, Dairy Farmers of Canada, Egg Farmers of Canada); and Canadian and American documentary producers (Lank/Beach Productions, The National Film Board of Canada, Merit Motion Productions, Sharona Schwartz, and Dr. Sanjay Gupta). Though the article failed to recognize the important work of this wider community over the years, I continue to appreciate the progress that has been made by these organizations and others, too many to mention here. It is too bad that Chatelaine chose to omit many of the good news stories. Clearly, more work needs to be done to increase Chatelaine’s understanding of the efforts of such a diverse group, all focused on a common goal: protection of people with severe allergies, especially children.

In closing, I would ask that Rogers, the publishers of Chatelaine magazine, to consider the impact of articles such as “*It’s just nuts*”. You have a moral obligation to provide balance and proper facts when highlighting children’s health issues. I urge you to publish another article on food allergy, this time with accurate information and in a respectful way.

I will follow up with you by phone within a week as I would really like to speak with you, Ms. Sanati. I have learned from experience that by talking, misunderstandings and misinformation can be clarified. Now, more than ever, I would like to offer my continued support in educating.

Sincerely,



Sara Shannon
Sabrina’s Mom & Allergy Advocate

cc: Mr. Brian Segal, President & CEO, Ms. Kerry Mitchell, Vice-President and Publisher, Consumer Publishing