

## A “MERE MOM” MOVES MOUNTAINS – AND LEGISLATION

Anna McCartney is the embodiment of Arthur Ashe’s quote: “*Start where you are; use what you have; do what you can.*” This Seattle-area mom, who modestly proclaims “Gee, if I can do it, then *anyone* can do it,” has worked with various nonprofits to help pass legislation in Congress, the state legislature, and local governments. And to think that it all started with a simple breakfast.

In 2001, Anna’s 11-month-old son, Ewan, ate eggs for the first time. Ewan immediately suffered a violent allergic reaction. He could not breathe because his airway had swollen shut. When firefighters arrived, they could not find a heartbeat. Fortunately, that particular rescue team was part of a pilot project that had epinephrine. When they gave Ewan the shot, he started breathing again and recovered.

After that near-death experience, Anna instinctively followed the law of nature that a mother protects her young; she vowed to monitor everything that Ewan ate. She knew the task would be tiring, but she did not realize it would be so complex. As it turns out, food makers were using a wide variety of names for simple products. For example, at least 18 different terms were being used for “eggs” – such as livetin, lysozyme, ovomucoid, albumin, and lecithin – and more than 30 confusing terms for milk. Concerned that “you shouldn’t have to be a PhD in Chemistry to tell whether a food is OK for an individual with an allergy” to eat, Anna kept thinking that there had to be a better way so that a babysitter or waiter could read ingredient labels to keep people from dying.

Anna then learned that others felt the same way. Legislation had been introduced in Congress to require simple and honest labeling, but that legislation kept being defeated. So when the Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act was reintroduced in 2003, the laws of nature compelled this mom to change the laws of man to finally require plain English labeling of the top eight food allergens: milk, egg, peanut, tree nut, fish, shellfish, wheat, and soy.

In a Hollywood script, the mom would march into a congressional hearing and recite some patriotic sayings from our nation’s founders to compel Congress to act. But this was real-world Seattle, not a fantasy being played inside a script-writer’s head.

As Anna admits, “I didn’t know anything. I was totally intimidated by the process. I didn’t want to call any government officials because, frankly, I could not recall the lessons from 11<sup>th</sup> grade civics,” but she knew she had to do something. So she printed out some information about the bill and took it, along with Ewan, down to her Congressman’s office, where they popped in unannounced, uncertain what to expect. Here is what happened:

“The Congressman’s local health aide (a doctor) happened to answer the door, and I told her about the bill. The Congressman happened to be there that day, and as he came walking down the hall he saw my adorable little three-year old and came over to talk with us. He read my handout, asked me a couple of questions, and was very nice. The next day, the health aide called to say that he’d signed on as a co-sponsor!

I was amazed at how easy that was, so I decided to pay visits to my Senators. One had already signed on as a co-sponsor, and the other did so right away after my visit. So then I basically decided to ask all the other members of Congress from my state; all but three

became co-sponsors.”

Using some old-fashioned and simple creativity, Anna worked with a local food allergy support group – Food Education Allergy Support Team (“FEAST”) – and others across the country to get this bill that had failed several times before not only passed, but also passed unanimously. (Anna is quick to point out: “I know that a *lot* of people worked hard on this bill, and I’m certainly not the only one involved, but it was really fun to feel like I made a difference.”)

Armed with new confidence in her ability, renewed faith in her government, and her passion for children, Anna then embarked on other legislative advocacy campaigns. For example, her son survived his ordeal through the happenstance of living in a neighborhood where a pilot project allowed the emergency medical technicians (EMTs) (as opposed to only paramedics) to administer epinephrine, yet reportedly about 200 Americans die and 30,000 more rush to the emergency room each year as a result of food allergies. So Anna helped pass a law in Washington state allowing EMTs, and not just paramedics, to save lives by administering epinephrine without having to track down a parent to get permission or see a prescription from a doctor for a child under the age of 18. Then, working with the Lung Association, she helped pass a state law to allow children with allergies to carry their inhalers and epinephrine autoinjectors with them at school rather than have school officials seize the devices and lock them up – because children have died when the key to the storage locker could not be found. And now she is meeting with people from other states and Canada to help others and learn more from others.

### Shared “Secrets” of Success

Anna McCartney shared the following low costs/no costs lessons she has learned about advocacy:

- *Watch and learn.* Anna said once she spent a day at the legislature, she could relax. She “saw all of these different people all asking for help. It made me realize that you don’t get help unless you ask for it.”
- *Ask for help.* Anna expressed genuine surprise at having senior staffers helping her. “I was amazed and delighted that many of the aides were so helpful. I had never been involved like this before and didn’t know what I was doing. I told congressional staffers this, and they became even more friendly and helpful. They get jaded, seeing professional lobbyists all the time.” And Anna said help came from other sources, too. In particular, she praised the CLPI’s resources to Bob Smucker: “He talked with me for such a long time and connected me to some great people out here.”
- *Find the “hook” to humanize your story – and – creativity counts.* Anna noticed that her Congressman seemed taken by her toddler, and his aide later commented it was “attention-grabbing” to be asking for help for her cute little toddler. So Anna printed up postcards with photos of children from her local food allergy support group on one side, with some information about the bill on the other side. She left space for people to add a short note. She estimates that she generated more than 4,000 of these postcards, which she credits for getting word spread about the real need for legislation.
- *Dogged determination.* “You have to be the squeaky wheel,” Anna observed. “I think a lot of times if you call and ask lawmakers to sign on as a cosponsor to your bill or something, they’ll listen to you and thank you for bringing this topic to their attention ... and then your paperwork gets put on a big pile on their desk and they lose track of it. Not because they’re not wanting to help, but because they have 1,000 other crises to deal with. So my trick is to be persistent, calling to follow-up every five days or something like that. So you call and say, “I know you’re so busy and I hate to be a bother, but I wonder if you have had a chance to talk to the Congressman about my bill yet.”
- *Use the media.* A staffer advised Anna to “get yourself on TV, because once you’ve been on TV, then they know you mean business.” She followed the advice and learned a few more things, such as that

your local news channel will be delighted because they told her the biggest problem in local television is finding people willing to go on camera, and doing it for a “warm and fuzzy” nonprofit issue was great. Also, being on television did give her more credibility because when meeting with legislators Anna told them she had gone on television about the issue and they seemed to notice her more. Plus, it advanced the mission of the organization to get word to the public about the cause.

*CLPI would like to thank Tim Delaney of the Center for Leadership, Ethics & Public Service for researching and writing this story. CLPI would also like to thank Arkansas HIPPY for sharing this story.*

© Copyright 2006, Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest