

PB and Justice

by Kelsey Todd

On a windy November day, classes halted for lunchtime at Gap State High School. Thirteen-year-old Daniel enters the cafeteria when he is hit in the back of the head with something. He turns around in confusion and is assailed again. This time he peels the bomb off of his right cheek. In his hand, he holds a piece of white bread covered with peanut butter. To many this may seem like a somewhat messy, childish prank. But, the sandwich's target is no ordinary schoolboy. Daniel has a severe peanut allergy and to him, this assault is deadly. Daniel remains calm, despite the severity of the situation. He extracts an EpiPen, antihistamine tablets, and an inhaler. As Daniel bends over the water fountain to prepare for the dose of medicine, the boy waves another piece of the peanut butter sandwich under Daniel's nose. Taken aback, Daniel breathes in deeply to calm himself then quickly swallows an antihistamine tablet. Unfortunately for Daniel, the fifteen minutes it takes the tablet to go into effect is simply too long. Instantly his eyes and tongue swell enormously. Daniel quickly dials the school office and urgently asks them for an ambulance. In the five minutes it takes the ambulance to arrive, Daniel makes his way to the nurse's office where he plunges the EpiPen into his right thigh. By this time, Daniel's tongue has cracked, begun to bleed, and swells so large he can barely breathe. His blood pressure drops steadily. Daniel is rushed to the hospital, given many doses of medicine, and watched carefully in intensive care. He recovers – but, though it may seem absurd to say, Daniel is lucky (Fynes-Clinton). Children like Daniel are often bullied and their safety undermined by adults. Awareness of the severity of peanut allergies and rational yet safe precautions, especially peanut bans, are necessary to protect allergic children.

Statistics have shown that peanut allergies are on the rise, doubling in just the past ten years (Sedgwick). In addition, fatal allergic reactions are responsible for the deaths of anywhere between one hundred and two hundred people a year. With these statistics and more school age children becoming allergic to peanuts, concern about their safety, especially in school has become a popular and surprisingly, highly controversial topic. Parents of such children have called for special precautions due to the severity of many peanut allergies. To accommodate them some schools have become completely peanut free. In other schools, the classroom the allergic student belongs to is deemed a peanut free zone. Still other policies designate special tables in the cafeteria for children with peanut allergies. Due to these precautions, awareness about peanut allergies has grown steadily over the years. Children's books, such as *The Princess and the Peanut Allergy* and *The Peanut- Free Café*, can be found in classrooms around the country as a way to educate younger children on the severity of such an allergy as well as helpful ways to keep allergic students safe and included.

Though it may seem easy to just sit a child with an allergy at a separate table or simply not bring in a peanut butter sandwich, controversy has erupted over this issue in recent years. According to Claudia Kalb in "Fear and Allergies in the Lunchroom," statistics show that fewer than one percent of children under five suffer from a peanut allergy. Further studies have concluded that though twenty-five percent of adults believe their child is allergic to a certain food, only eight percent of these children are diagnosed with a true allergy. From these facts the argument arises that children do have this allergy, but people are overreacting and the precautions are warped by paranoia. When hearing the story of one San Francisco school, the argument seems plausible. In her article, "Have Americans Gone Nuts Over Nut Allergies?," Sharples discusses this particular California elementary school and its practice of searching each

child's lunch. The student's bagged lunches are combed thoroughly for any visible or hidden peanut products and a nurse stands by to make certain each child washes their hands. A similar extreme, as noted by Sharples, occurred on a Massachusetts school bus when a stray peanut was found on the floor of the bus, prompting a swift evacuation of the whole bus. Dr. Nicholas Christakis, a Harvard professor and parent of one of the affected students, published an article on the incident in which he called these precautions a form of mounting social hysteria.

While some criticize the precautions as paranoia, others claim, in a seemingly paradoxical argument, that these precautions are dangerous. One reason for this claim is that recent studies have suggested that peanut bans in schools or even peanut free zones can be detrimental to the student body as a whole and lead to more peanut allergies among the students (Sharples). Other critics that support this argument claim that peanut bans give children a false sense of security, instead of instilling a habit of caution and alertness within allergic children (Sedgwick).

Although these arguments are prevalent, the most passionate opponents of peanut bans are concerned with "saving" the cherished peanut and butter jelly sandwich, but the cost of preserving this little sandwich could be very high. Roy Roberson defends the classic PB and J sandwich with fervor in his article, "School's Plan to Ban PBJ Sandwiches Absurd." Roberson begins his argument by offering an analogy: he says that though he is allergic to onions, he does not expect McDonald's to stop putting onions on their cheeseburgers. As his article progresses, Roberson says that parents who believe a smear of peanut butter can trigger their child's allergy are wrong. He cites a study by Johns Hopkins University that showed basic cleaning supplies, such as Lysol wipes, can remove allergens effectively. Rather than peanut bans, Roberson cites this study as the solution to peanut allergies. Perhaps Roberson has never heard of the Baptist

family, who was criticized as being hysterical and finicky regarding their son, Alex's, peanut allergy. The Baptist's selected a school for their son with a peanut free zone to keep him safe. This precaution wasn't an overreaction; on the contrary it was ineffective. Peanut butter somehow crossed the line between the zones of the cafeteria and Alex died on the bathroom floor (Fynes-Clinton). Perhaps Roberson would claim this incident is tragic, but simply an exception or a mistake. Yet Roberson's argument might be undermined completely by the story of another little boy, who upon sitting down on an airplane went into anaphylactic shock due to peanut dust in the air from the passenger before him (Gallagher). This account shows that a simple wiping down of a surface is not completely effective in removing allergens and protecting a child.

Adults' resistance to peanut bans is rather shocking in its intensity and hostility. Unfortunately, parent's attitudes not only affect the safety of allergic children, but also become a source of antagonism for other children. Such people would benefit from hearing an analogy of Mike Tringale, head of external affairs at the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America: "But you wouldn't throw razor blades all over the gymnasium. For these allergic kids, putting peanut butter in the cafeteria is the same thing" (Sayre). Surprisingly peanut butter is actually being thrown like razor blades across cafeterias. Children with peanut allergies, like Daniel, are often subject to taunting, bullying, and even worse, physical assault. Angela Haupt cites accounts of peanut crumbs mischievously scattered in an allergic student's lunchbox or peanut butter being smeared across children's heads in her article, "Health Buzz: Kids With Food Allergies Often Bullied." Haupt also includes a study published by *Annals of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology*. The study concluded over thirty percent of children with food allergies are victims of bullying. Half of the three hundred and fifty- three surveyed children said they had been physically threatened, though they also said verbal abuse was the most common form of bullying. It is

especially notable that eighty percent of these bullying incidents occurred at schools.

So it seems between unaccommodating parents and bullying, possibly caused by these dismissive adults, children with peanut allergies face many hardships. Luckily, amidst the shocking and disturbing controversy over accommodations for allergic children, help is available. Hiller's Markets in Michigan are responding to the trend of growing peanut allergies by dedicating a section of its store to carefully, visibly labeled peanut free products. The owner hopes to increase his peanut free products as well as have a fair of just peanut free foods before school begins (Gallagher). Peabutter is another alternative that is trying to help those with allergies. Peabutter is made from a brown pea and combined with sugar and other ingredients to mimic peanut butter in a safe manner. Though some animals refuse to eat peabutter, some humans swear by it. But due to the fear of peabutter being mixed up with peanut butter, it has been banned from schools.

Though there are significant efforts by the food industry to provide safe and healthy alternatives to peanut butter, there is much room for improvement concerning the safety of allergic children. *The Peanut-Free Café* best illustrates this lesson. The book's main character Simon loves to eat a bagel with peanut butter for lunch everyday. When Grant, who has a peanut allergy, enters the school, the principal starts a peanut free table. Grant sits there alone, and Simon suggests making the peanut free table someplace fun and exciting. But, Simon cannot take part in any of the activities because he cannot stop eating peanut butter. Eventually Simon learns to enjoy peanut buttered bagels at home, after school and sits with Grant during lunch (Hoskins). The story is simple and directed toward children, but the lesson is for all ages. On one level the book shows that students with peanut allergies should not be isolated or bullied; but, more importantly it makes the simple point that children can enjoy peanut butter at home, instead of at

school. These lessons are valuable, yet peanut free tables are isolating and become a target of school bullying. Peanut bans are the best solution because such bans reduce the chance of a fatal reaction most completely. If students save the PB and J sandwiches for home, they can save their classmate's lives.

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