

TRAGEDY IN THE CLASSROOM

How food in the classroom can endanger allergic children

by Gina Clowes

GINA CLOWES: Amy, you have an unforgettable story to tell, one that is shocking and terrifying. Would you start by telling us a little about your family?

AMY ROSELAND: Sure, I'm Amy, married to Chris and we have two children Max, who is seven years old and Ruby is three. Max has food allergies and asthma.

GINA: Max was in first grade this school year. How were things going prior to December?

AMY: Before he started, I was concerned about how the school would manage his food allergies.



Max



Roseland Family

They felt that they had dealt with food allergies before and everything would be fine.

They sent letters home to the classroom parents saying that there was a child with severe food allergies, so "Please do not send any products with peanuts."

Throughout the first few months of the school year, I got some calls and texts from the teacher. She would ask, "*Can Max have this?*" regarding a snack or candy.

There was a lot of food in that classroom! Max had a box with *safe snacks* there too for unplanned events.

GINA: A lot of parents struggle with the non-stop food in the classroom. What happened before the holiday break last December?

AMY: The teacher planned a movie-day party for the day before their holiday break.

She sent home a note about it, so I went up the morning of the party to check the snacks she planned to serve.

I checked them both: mini marshmallows and popcorn. I read all of the ingredients. They were both safe and I told her that Max could have them.

GINA: Then you got the call.

AMY: Yes, around noon, I got the call from the teacher.

She told me that Max had taken a bite of a peanut butter granola bar. I just couldn't believe it!

I said "Get him to the nurse and get a full dose of Benadryl in him!"

I drove up to the school and when I got there, Max was in the nurse's office.

She gave him a dose of liquid antihistamine per his plan*, and she tested his oxygen levels. They were fine. I decided to take him home anyway.

In the car, he told me his tummy hurt and he started to cry, so I called his pediatrician. They said, "Take him to Children's hospital." So I did.

When we arrived there, we were in triage for 30 to 45 minutes with no treatment.

Then within just a few minutes, things went horribly wrong.

Hives started creeping up his face and neck. He started coughing and wheezing.

They rushed him back and gave him multiple doses of epinephrine, prednisone, breathing treatments.

Nothing was stopping this reaction.

At this point, there must have been a dozen nurses and doctors frantically rushing around him. They had to intubate him.

They had Chris and me in the next room. They had to sedate him and he threw up. They put the tube down his throat and his heart rate dropped.

My husband Chris, Max's dad, was with me at this point. We were so scared.

One of the nurses came into the room and said "**He's taken a turn.**" and I asked, "For the better?" She said, "**No for the worse. We're doing CPR.**"

That's when we saw the chaplain. I almost lost it.

All of these thoughts were swirling around in my brain.

I just kept thinking that if I lost him over a peanut, I would never be able to accept it! Over a snack, over some stupid snack

They got a weak pulse and they rushed him to the PICU. [Pediatric Intensive Care Unit]. It was unbearable for Chris and me to wait.

Finally, one of the doctors came out and said ***“Things are not going well for Max. His chance of survival at this point is very low. We have one option and that is to put him on an ECMO machine [Extra Corporeal Membrane Oxygenation]- basically a life-support machine that does the work for the heart and lungs.”***

They would perform surgery and would have to cut through his jugular veins to insert the catheters.

GINA: You must have been terrified.

Amy: In my mind, I thought, *“There is no way he can go on that machine.”* It sounded horrible—what they would have to do to my little boy.

The doctor finally told us ***“If it were my son, I would do this.”*** So we said yes.

It was an actual surgery to even put him on the machine. It was risky.

I remember waiting. The anxiety was so horrible. I was so scared to see the doctor come around the corner. I just put my face in my hands. You just don’t know

But when he did come, he said ***“You’re not going to lose your son tonight.”***



Max on the ECMO machine

It was a moment I will never forget!

So he was on the ECMO machine from dinner Tuesday evening until lunchtime Wednesday.

GINA: We’re you able to check on him through this time? What did you feel when you saw him?

AMY: It was horribly scary to see him like that with these catheters—they’re big—a half inch each, in his neck. Pumping blood in and out. And he was paralyzed, literally, and heavily sedated.

At the same time, he's alive!

His skin was horribly blotchy red on his arms and legs, from the reaction.

Throughout the night, we could see the blotches starting to fade. So we knew it was working. The reaction was leaving his body.

We kept asking throughout the night: "Are we out of the woods yet?" They just said: "Baby steps."

They weaned him off of the ECMO machine slowly. They turned it down so they could see how well his lungs were functioning on their own.

GINA: Did they have to do a second surgery to take him off of the ECMO machine?

AMY: Yes, they needed to remove the catheters and they were able to repair the veins for Max, which they are not always able to do.

It was a family friend who did the second surgery, so we felt grateful for that too.

When he finally woke up, he was on a ventilator.

GINA: I cannot imagine.

AMY: On Wednesday afternoon he was still sedated but he was trying to mouth words even with the ventilator.

We thought he wanted to get the ventilator out but he was mouthing "Ruby. Ruby."

He wanted to know where his baby sister was!

GINA: What a sweet little boy you have.

AMY: We had a really quiet ride home. He was in his car seat and when I turned around, his eyes were just spilling over with tears. [crying]

He said: "*Mom, I'm just so glad to be home.*"

It broke my heart what he went through. The doctor told us that during this ordeal, Max told him "*I'm going to die.*"

Once we were home, he didn't talk for several days after this. Even on Christmas, he was very quiet.



He is scarred physically and emotionally.

GINA: What do you do with all of that emotion?

AMY: I kept going over this in my head.

In the hospital, I was so mad about the mother [classroom parent] who sent in the peanut butter treat.

She was going about her holiday and she had no idea what we were going through.

A few days later, I called her. I explained who I was and reminded her that **the teacher sent a note that said not to send peanut products into the classroom.**

I asked her why she sent in a peanut snack.

She said, *“Oh, that’s right, it was a variety pack of granola bars.”*

I said, *“Well one of the peanut butter ones landed on Max’s plate. He’s been in intensive care for the last three days fighting for his life.”*

I said “It’s very important not to send peanut butter treats into this classroom.”

And that was it.

GINA: She never apologized, sent you a card, a letter, sent Max a toy, anything?

AMY: No nothing, but they don’t send snacks in anymore.

GINA: That is hard to believe. It’s not like they could deny the severity of what happened. It was all over the news!

AMY: I don’t understand it either.

GINA: I admire you for letting her know. You may have kept another child safe—which is something you are doing elsewhere too.

I believe that your story will help others, especially teachers, understand what can happen, but this is still very recent. It must be hard to share this story.

AMY: I want to do it. *Things have to change!*

I hope that we can remove food as a reward and as part of learning activities. We have to think differently about food—especially in classroom where it doesn’t need to be!

GINA: I agree completely. How are you doing through all of this?

AMY: I think about it all of the time. I just want Max to be safe.

I want him to be safe when he is at school. As you know, the school offered to set up a 504 plan for Max after all this.

GINA: Hmm. I'm not impressed with their timing.

AMY: I know. I'm glad Max has a 504 plan now, but I just want this school year to be over. It's been so hard. *Our trust has been broken.*

GINA: I'm so sorry Amy.

I hope that people will share your story with teachers and school administrators.

With 8% of children having at least one food allergy, we have to be so careful when serving food. Thank you for sharing your story.

AMY: I don't want what happened to Max to happen to any other child ever again.

Our children deserve to be safe at school.

* Due to the severity of Max's reaction, his treatment plan was updated by his allergist. The protocol for treating allergic reactions and anaphylaxis at Children's Hospital was also changed. We'll share more details on these changes soon.

Food Allergy Action Plans are patient-specific plans. If you have questions about how your child should be treated in the event of an allergic reaction, please consult with your child's allergist.

Download a free Food Allergy Action Plan here: <http://www.foodallergy.org/page/food-allergy-action-plan1>

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