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Food Allergies Stir a Mother to Action

By [KIM SEVERSON](#)

Lafayette, Colo.

ROBYN O'BRIEN likes to joke that at least she hasn't started checking the rearview mirror to see if she's being followed.

But some days, her imagination gets away from her and she wonders if it's only a matter of time before Big Food tries to stop her from exposing what she sees as a profit-driven global conspiracy whose collateral damage is an alarming increase in childhood food [allergies](#).

Ms. O'Brien has presented her views, albeit in a less radical wrapper, on CNN, CBS and in frequent print interviews. Frontier Airlines and Wild Oats stores distribute the allergy-awareness gear she designed.

Her story is one of several in a new book, "Healthy Child, Healthy World" (Dutton, March 2008), whose contributors include doctors, parents and celebrities like [Meryl Streep](#).

Sitting at the table in her suburban kitchen, with her four young children tumbling in and out, Ms. O'Brien, 36, seems an unlikely candidate to be food's Erin Brockovich (who, by the way, has taken Ms. O'Brien under her wing).

She grew up in a staunchly Republican family in Houston where lunch at the country club frequented by George and [Barbara Bush](#) followed Sunday church services. She was an honors student, earned a master's degree in business and, like her husband, Jeff, made a living as a financial analyst.

Ms. O'Brien was also the kind of mom who rolled her eyes when the kid with a peanut allergy showed up at the birthday party. Then, about two years ago, she fed her youngest child scrambled eggs. The baby's face quickly swelled into a grotesque mask. "What did you spray on her?" she screamed at her other children. Little Tory had a severe [food allergy](#), and Ms. O'Brien's journey had begun.

By late that night, she had designed a universal symbol to identify children with food allergies. She now puts the icon, a green stop sign with an exclamation point, on lunch bags, stickers and even the little charms children use to dress up their Crocs. These products and others are sold on her Web site, [AllergyKids.com](#), which she unveiled, strategically, on Mother's Day in 2006.

The \$30,000 Ms. O'Brien made from the products last year is incidental, she said. Working largely from a laptop on her dining room table, she has looked deep into the perplexing world of childhood food allergies and seen a conspiracy that threatens the health of America's children. And, she profoundly believes, it is up to her and parents everywhere to stop it.

Her theory — that the food supply is being manipulated with additives, genetic modification, hormones and herbicides, causing increases in allergies, [autism](#) and other disorders in children — is not supported by leading

researchers or the largest allergy advocacy groups.

That only feeds Ms. O'Brien's conviction that the influence of what she sees as the profit-hungry food industry runs deep. In just a few dizzying steps, she can take you from a box of Kraft macaroni and cheese to Monsanto's genetically modified seeds to [Donald H. Rumsfeld](#), who once ran the company that created the sweetener aspartame.

Through creative use of e-mail, relentless inquiry and a persona carefully crafted around the protective mother archetype, Ms. O'Brien has emerged as a populist hero among parents who troll the Internet for any hint about why their children have food allergies.

"You have changed my life ... my [diet](#) ... my health ... my spirit ... and I thank YOU," a father who had lost his teenage daughter to [anaphylactic shock](#) told her by e-mail.

Ms. O'Brien encourages people to do what she did: throw out as much nonorganic processed food as you can afford to. Avoid anything genetically modified, artificially created or raised with hormones. Don't eat food with ingredients you can't pronounce.

Once she cleaned out her cupboards, she said, her four children started behaving better. Their health problems, which her doctor attributed to allergies to milk and other foods, cleared up.

"It was absolutely terrifying to unearth this story," she said over lunch at a restaurant in Boulder, Colo. "These big food companies have an intimate relationship with every household in America, and they are making our children sick. I was rocked. You don't want to hear that this has actually happened."

But has it?

Record numbers of parents are heading to doctors concerned that their children are allergic to a long list of foods. States are passing laws requiring schools to have policies protecting children with food allergies. But no one knows why the number of allergies seems to be on the rise, or even if they are rising as fast as some believe.

Ms. O'Brien and leading allergy researchers agree that few reliable studies on food allergies exist. The best estimates suggest that 4 to 8 percent of young children suffer from them, though the reactions tend to grow less serious and less frequent as children grow older.

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) put the number of deaths linked to food allergies at 12 in 2004, the most recent year for which data are available. However, its statisticians point out that such figures are drawn only from doctors' notations on death certificates.

"It's a soft number, and it might well be an understatement," said Arialdi Miniño, a statistician at the agency's National Center for Health Statistics.

Dr. Elizabeth Gleghorn is the director of pediatric gastroenterology at the Children's Hospital and Research Center in Oakland, Calif. She has been in practice for 20 years, and has noticed a recent increase in [eczema](#), which can indicate food allergies. But she doesn't think food allergies are increasing dramatically.

Often, a child might have intolerance to a food and not a true allergy. But the Internet has afforded more ways for parents to inform themselves and do their own diagnosing, which could add to the popular impression that

food allergies are rising at alarming rates, Dr. Gleghorn said.

Many health professionals, though, agree that something is changing. Among the amalgam of theories that weigh the effects of [genetics](#) and environment, the hygiene hypothesis intrigues many researchers. It holds that children are being exposed to fewer micro-organisms and, as a result, have weaker immune systems.

“But this alone cannot account for the massive relative increase in food allergy compared with other allergic disease such as [asthma](#),” said Dr. Marc E. Rothenberg, the director of allergy and immunology at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center, the second-largest pediatric research facility in the country.

Could it be that a toxic food environment has made children’s immune systems go haywire? It’s hard to find an expert in the field who supports Ms. O’Brien’s theory. “I don’t think it can be proven, so I can’t say scientifically one way or the other,” Dr. Gleghorn said.

Mix the lack of hard data with an increasingly complex food landscape, and you’ve got Robyn O’Brien.

“Food allergies just become a focus for a broader fear about the food system,” said the author [Michael Pollan](#), a contributor to The New York Times Magazine.

Mr. Pollan, in both “The Omnivore’s Dilemma” and his new book, “In Defense of Food” (January, Penguin), shares many of Ms. O’Brien’s views about industrialized agriculture. He also has a niece with a peanut allergy. So Ms. O’Brien sent him an e-mail message, and a correspondence began.

Ms. O’Brien took his responses as an endorsement of her work, and then mentioned his support in messages to other people. Mr. Pollan, who said he has no idea if her theories are accurate, asked her to stop telling people he was working with her.

Leveraging brief e-mail exchanges with notable people is an important method that Ms. O’Brien uses to build her universe. The unlikely mix includes members of [Robert F. Kennedy Jr.](#)’s staff; Mary Alice Stephenson, a host of “America’s Most Smartest Model”; and, recently, Dr. Mehmet Oz, a regular on [Oprah Winfrey](#)’s show.

“The fact that people like him and Malcolm Gladwell, presidential campaigns, celebs take the time to reply means a lot as it gives me hope that people are still engaged,” she said in an e-mail message to this reporter.

While some of her contacts, like Mr. Gladwell, an author and a writer for The New Yorker, don’t remember her, the strategy has worked. Nell Newman, who runs the organic arm of Newman’s Own products, spoke up on her behalf on the national news. Deborah Koons Garcia, the widow of [Jerry Garcia](#) and director of the documentary “The Future of Food,” invited her to lunch.

But her biggest asset might be a relentless drive to wind together obscure health theories, blog postings and corporate financial statements. She then posts her analyses on her Web site.

She chides top allergy doctors who are connected to Monsanto, the producer of herbicides and genetically modified seeds. She asserts that the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network, the nation’s leading food allergy advocacy group, is tainted by the money it receives from food manufacturers and peanut growers.

Anne Muñoz-Furlong founded the network in 1991 after her daughter was found to have milk and egg allergies. She said the group now has 30,000 members and a \$5.6 million budget.

Although Kraft did help the organization start its Web site and other food manufacturing companies and trade groups sponsor some of its programs, that support has amounted to about \$100,000. Mrs. Muñoz-Furlong said that she and doctors on her medical board do not believe that genetically modified foods cause food allergies because most children with allergies react to specific foods, like eggs or milk.

And, she said, communicating regularly with industry can help get the word to parents about potential allergens in products, and supporting research to identify causes of allergies helps consumers more than companies.

She also cautioned against taking the advice of people who have no medical training or run Web sites not certified to have reliable medical information. "She's a dot-com," Mrs. Muñoz-Furlong said of Ms. O'Brien. "It's completely different than a dot-org. From the very beginning our intent was education."

(Ms. O'Brien did recently start a nonprofit foundation to support research that is not tied to the food industry.)

On the days when Ms. O'Brien grows discouraged at being David against the Goliath of Big Food, she turns to the people who believe her.

Erin Brockovich, whose brother died of a food allergy years ago, was a legal file clerk who helped land a record judgment against the Pacific Gas and Electric Company for contaminating drinking water. She is an environmental consultant who is popular on the inspirational lecture circuit.

Ms. Brockovich said her new friend does a great job of arming everyday people with facts, so they can take a stand.

"You don't have to be a doctor or a scientist to look into whether our food supply is safe," she said. "Being obsessed doesn't mean she's crazy. Frankly, I think it takes a little bit of being crazy to make a difference in this world."

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