

Good morning. My name is Ruby Johnson and I'm a mom of 7 kids ranging from an 18 year old college freshman to a 5 year old kindergartener from New Lenox, Illinois. I'm here to tell you about the biggest blessing in my life- the fact that my oldest child is still alive. As you'll hear, that could have easily NOT been the case.

On August 16th, I loaded up our oldest daughter and all the makings of a dorm room to drive her from Illinois to Colorado to begin her freshman year of college.

As we set out, she began to cough, to complain of pain in her chest when she took a deep breath and to shiver like she was running a fever.

She also admitted to me that she had been vaping.

What started as an exciting rite of passage turned into a terrifying near death experience that involved a week long hospital stay where my daughter went from a healthy vibrant 18 year old to a patient who needed rapidly increasing amounts of oxygen and medications to treat her declining health.

When we arrived in her college town, we went directly to the hospital... she was nauseous, tachycardic, coughing, running a high fever, couldn't take a deep breath without intense pain, and struggled to keep her oxygen saturation up to even the mid 80s. A CT scan showed what the doctors called a diffuse pneumonia all over her lungs. Though antibiotics appropriate for pneumonia were started immediately, her condition continued to worsen as her oxygen needs increased steadily, and she was transferred to the ICU, in case more extreme measures to help her became necessary.

With every doctor, came the same questions- have you traveled out of the country recently, have you had a cold and the million dollar question- Are you a smoker? The answer to all those questions was no.

Finally they asked "How about e-cigarettes?"

Her answer to that question was always yes, though it wasn't until we got to the third doctor to see her that it actually seemed to be taken seriously.

It was that doctor who really paid attention to the fact that she said she had been vaping, and that she was now experiencing symptoms that matched with the newly reported cases of a mysterious lung illness popping up across the country. He did his research by contacting doctors and hospitals that had already seen similar cases in order to determine the best course of treatment.

I'll never forget watching her cry that she literally couldn't breathe without excruciating pain, as she was pumped full of IV fluids, antibiotics, steroids, pain meds, anti-nausea meds and a diuretic to clear fluid from her badly inflamed lungs. She couldn't even get up to walk to the bathroom without her alarms screaming because her oxygen saturation was dipping so low. Her belly was dark purple from the nightly injections they gave her to prevent blood clots as she lay in a hospital bed.

Our daughter ended up being one of the “lucky” ones in this case... because she got to leave the hospital. And can breathe without supplemental oxygen right now. But it could’ve so easily been a totally different, tragic outcome. Her pulmonologist said that he feared that had we waiting another 24-36 hours to seek medical attention she’d have most likely been unresponsive, on a ventilator. We’re so grateful that she received the care she did, though we don’t know what the future holds in term of permanent lung damage.

It’s hard enough to be a parent in today’s world. We all know that teenagers will inevitably make bad choices and hopefully learn from them. But it’s scary to think that there is an industry full of largely unregulated products with zero long-term health studies that are so attractive and easily accessible to youth. The e-cigarette industry has actively targeted our kids through social media campaigns, advertising on Quizlet- a popular homework site for younger kids and through flavors that were clearly created to appeal to young people. This committee knows better than anyone how youth have been fooled into believing these products are safe by companies that act as if they could care less about their health and well-being of these kids. Consequently, we have the most serious adolescent public health crisis our country has faced in decades.

These products are DESIGNED to be hidden from parents and teachers and they accomplish that well. With smells and vapor that disappear as quickly as they appear, and devices that look like flash drives and Apple watches- it would seem we are fighting a losing battle.

You may have read JUUL CEO Kevin Burns address this epidemic in the recent TIME Magazine article by saying “BLANK happens.”

Well, “BLANK” happened to my family. And I’m joining the movement of moms that is Parents Against Vaping e-Cigarettes and saying “Enough is enough!” Our kids will not be the guinea pigs.

These products flooded the market without anyone knowing how they would cause damage and now we’re trying to clean up a mess that involves a cocktail of mystery toxins in the proprietary flavors, devices that are easily tampered with and a generation of teens who are addicted to nicotine. People continue to get sick, and teens continue to vape. If this was Romaine lettuce, the shelves would be empty. We desperately need our legislators to help us by banning the flavors that have drawn in youth like my daughter - including mint and menthol. What happened to my daughter was indicative of this outbreak but points to the bigger crisis- our kids are being hooked by flavors. With youth tobacco rates at an all-time low, kids who would have never picked up a cigarette instead start using flavored e-cigarettes- and as nicotine becomes a gateway to other substances. The FDA has allowed these markets to proliferate, flourish and remain for purchase and consumption -without pre-market review.

This was a terrifying experience and something that probably would have been easier to keep private. But I’m here today to share our story with the hope that NO other family will have to live this same nightmare. I’m a mom who is in her teenagers’ business constantly, and did all the “right” things and this still happened. Our youth are being actively targeted by manufacturers with appealing flavors and are able to satisfy their nicotine addiction using devices that are designed to be secretive. It’s time we do something about it. This goes beyond party lines, because these are ALL of our children.

