

DETAILS

Gina Hunt's Story

Posted Wednesday January 26th 2005 (Charlotte Observer) Restaurant warnings urged after teen's death Postings sought for those with allergies GAIL SMITH-ARRANTS AND KAREN GARLOCH Staff Writers CONCORD - Early Saturday afternoon, Gina Marie Hunt, 14, excitedly called her grandmother, who was shopping nearby in Concord Mills. She had found a \$50 sweater on sale for \$5. Then the Concord eighth-grader went to the food court with a friend to get Chinese food. About 20 minutes later, Gina collapsed. She died shortly afterward of a severe allergic reaction to peanuts, her mother said at the graveside service Tuesday afternoon. Now her mother, local health officials and other area parents whose children are allergic to peanuts are calling on restaurants to post warnings if they use peanuts or peanut traces as ingredients. Experts say peanut allergies are becoming more common. Among the most dangerous food allergens, peanuts can cause a violent reaction with a drop in blood pressure and closing of airways. Gina and her family were extremely cautious about her allergy, said her mother, Sandra Price. Price even asked Northwest Cabarrus Middle School officials to make sure that on field trips, Gina would ride in a bus with no peanut snacks or peanut-butter sandwiches aboard. But this one time, said her grandmother Nina Realmuto, Gina was "caught up in the moment" and forgot to ask whether the food at Yeung's Lotus Express contained peanut products. She also wasn't carrying her syringe of epinephrine, which can reduce the effects of severe allergic reactions, Price said. Gina, realizing she was having an allergic attack, called Realmuto on her cell phone. Gina, who also had asthma, used the inhaler she kept in her purse. "She said, 'I'm throwing up. We have to go home,'" Realmuto said. But by the time she found her, Gina was on her stomach on the floor of the mall. A nurse came by and performed CPR. Cabarrus County paramedics gave Gina epinephrine shots and took her to NorthEast Medical Center, where she was pronounced dead about 2:30 p.m. Price said she didn't get the name of the nurse who tried to help her daughter but would like to thank her. "They just couldn't get her heart started," Realmuto said. Restaurant warnings Price said her family was vigilant about checking labels. But perhaps because she hadn't had any violent reactions in years, Gina didn't always carry her epinephrine pack. "She's been reading boxes since she was a little girl," Price said of food ingredient labels. Gina also was allergic to eggs and dairy products, she said. "Just the day before, when she was getting sorbet, she said, 'I could die' " from peanuts, Realmuto said. Price said she will push for restaurants to post warnings on whether they use peanuts or peanut products in their food. Restaurants aren't required to post such warnings, said Fred Pilkington, executive director of the Cabarrus Health Alliance. "It's an excellent idea because teenagers don't always ask questions like that, and they don't know they're getting a peanut ... product," he said. In a check Tuesday, no fast-food stops in the mall's food court had signs warning about peanut ingredients. Efforts to reach Bethesda, Md.-based HMS Host, which owns Yeung's Lotus Express, were unsuccessful Tuesday. Peanut allergies growing. Peanut allergies got national attention in 1998 when the U.S. Department of Transportation ordered airlines to set aside peanut-free zones for allergic passengers. When Gina was 2, Price said, she had a severe attack on an airplane that served peanuts. The prevalence of peanut allergy in children doubled in five years, according to a study published in the December 2003 Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology. Today, about 1.6 million Americans have peanut allergies, according to the Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network, an advocacy group for the 7 million people in the United States with food allergies. The group estimates about one in every 125 children has peanut allergy. Among food allergies, peanut allergy is the most dangerous, said Dr. Richard Roberts at Carolina Asthma and Allergy Center in Charlotte. Injections of epinephrine should be administered quickly, he said; otherwise, "most people die within minutes." A recent study showed that teens with food allergy and asthma appear to be at highest risk, because they often dine out, are less likely to carry medications and may fail to recognize symptoms, according to FAAN. Other area parents reacted strongly to the news of Gina's death and said they worry for their allergic children. "I spent a good part of the morning crying for this family," said

Nicola Carter of Charlotte, who has two children, ages 7 and 9, with peanut allergies. She said most people don't understand when parents ask for signs at restaurants or special accommodations at school. "It's such an awful, awful tragedy to lose a child over something like this," she said. STAFF WRITERS RONNIE GLASSBERG AND LENA WARMACK CONTRIBUTED