

Finding His Quiet Home

Andy Pace:

Welcome to episode 503 of Non Toxic Environments. I am your host, Andy Pace. Hello folks. This is Andy Pace. Really looking forward to sharing this episode with you. This is by far in a way one of my favorite interviews I've ever done. And it's not just because it's with a client and with a friend, but because it has such an amazing message to share to everybody. Mike Bender will be joining us. Mike is an author and a screenwriter, and he has lived his life with Lyme disease, and stemming from that, a whole host of other issues.

Recently, Mike wrote an article for Men's Health magazine. Matter of fact, it's in the March issue; March 2022 issue of Men's Health Magazine. And it has created quite a buzz all over the world. And Mike and I had a chance to discuss the project today, but we also, I think we more talked about Mike's life and how it has been coping with this and how his family has reacted to it. So without any more delay, here is Mike Bender. Mike, it's so great to finally have you on the show today. First, how are you? How's the home?

Mike Bender:

Well, it's great to be here and the house is... I was actually just... I'm just about to post the article to my own Instagram and I was just writing a message to people because a lot of people have asked me how the house is doing as well. And the house is fantastic and has really delivered in terms of what I hoped it would...

Andy Pace:

Fabulous. And of course we'll get into that in a bit, but I think what's really interesting for our listeners is to hear about your story. And I've told everybody about your background and so forth, but for someone who has sensitivities to chemicals and mold and electromagnetic fields and so forth. Do you have an idea when this all started for you?

Mike Bender:

Well, it's... I can go back pretty far to be honest in terms of the sensitivity thing. Even as a kid, I remember my parents always saying, oh, Mike, you're so sensitive. That goes back pretty far. But where I sort of... Where I start with is at around 10, 11 years old, I was bit by a tick in New Jersey. I grew up in Northern New Jersey in a town called Florham Park, which was full; just full of deer. And so now that I've gotten older and I've gone onto Facebook and posted my story, it's amazing how many people have reached out to me from the town I grew up and saying, oh, I was bit as well, or I also got Lyme. I think it was everywhere, but of course there was no awareness at that time.

I certainly didn't know anything about it. My parents didn't. And so I got bit by a tick around that age. And in the article I discussed, it was my mother pulled it off of my testicle, which as a child, that stays with you. It does, not get that image nor the feeling of having that pulled off of you. And I remember it was quite embedded. Again, all part of the trauma of that memory.

Andy Pace:

Of course.

Mike Bender:

But I think that was the start. And I've only learned this in the years, in the last few years. But with chronic Lyme, it's just like, it's a slow bleed. In the beginning, your body and especially a child's body may be strong enough to deal with it. And then over time as you accumulate more toxins and things that are in the air and in foods and environmental, the body starts to break down, and that's the best way I can describe what I experienced going into my twenties, into my thirties and my forties.

It just felt like I was like a car that out was pulling weight and the weight just kept getting greater and greater and greater. And as I got into my forties, I started to notice, okay, now it's not just my digestive system, it's my nervous system that seems to be reacting and getting dysfunctional. And so that is really kind of the arc of the journey, if that makes sense.

Andy Pace:

Okay. And so that's very similar to how we describe chemical sensitivity and other sensitivities as being, everybody's born with this barrel inside of them to fill up with pollutants. And at the bottom of the barrel is a spigot and a filter, and your body filters out the toxins. But at some point, and you don't know when, whether it's you're 10 years old or 50 years old, that barrel starts to overflow and it just cannot take it anymore. And every drop that gets added to that barrel just causes another overflow. And so this really makes sense as to how this occurs for most people who develop these types of sensitivities.

Andy Pace:

It is low level exposure over a long period of time. For others, it could be massive exposure. It could be a pesticide application in the home, or maybe they moved into a new home and it had

brand new carpet and the entire house is off gassing, and that causes... that's the big trigger. But obviously for you, it's early Lyme's disease. And then just the body over time just cannot handle the load that being put onto it.

Mike Bender:

Yeah, that's right. And I think Lyme specifically, because, and I know you have probably dealt with a lot of people who have a similar profile in that they got bit by a tick or they got Lyme first. And then Lyme has a... It seems that it affects that spigot that you're talking about. It makes it much more difficult to detox things like mold.

Andy Pace:

Right.

Mike Bender:

And some of the other things that we find in the environment. Mold specifically becomes an issue I think for people with Lyme. And in my case, I think that was what took me from a level six problem to a level nine problem, which was I then in my late thirties moved into a house that had mold, and that's when things really, really went haywire for me. As a kid, I had allergies, I had... I got sick more often. There were things, but it was not pronounced enough that someone would say, oh, we've got a real problem.

It just seemed like that was sensitive to things, sensitive to the environment, and allergies, what was that when you're a kid? You're like, I didn't even know what an allergy was, but I just thought, oh, you just got to take the... you got to spray the stuff up your nose and that's life. So, yeah, I think that's right. I think that bucket analogy is really good. And in fact, I had a

doctor at some point. One of the really caring doctors that I came in contact with over the years who explained to me that when you get that full with junk and the body's not pushing it out, you have to be really careful about how you detox, which is a... it's a triggering word for me because I find that people use that word sometimes incorrectly, but let's just say clean out the body; allow the body to filter these things out.

Mike Bender:

You want to do it very slowly. And I think the mistake that a lot of people make when they're in this position, when they feel like, oh, I've encountered all of this stuff and this junk that's accumulated in my body is I want to just get it out right away. And if like you just said, Andy, it's taken years and years to accumulate all this. So if you try to open up that spigot and let it out in a matter of a week over a detox, think about the shock that you're putting a body that's already compromised in. So, she was like, we're going to let it drip. That's the way to do it. And that's why it takes a lot of patience and a lot of time, I think, for people to recover once they've hit that point.

Andy Pace:

Did you do anything or follow any specific type of detox programs specifically, or did you have... did your physician just make something up for you?

Mike Bender:

Well, when you go to doctors who offer detox protocols, there's always a protocol. There's always something that they've developed or that they use, and they use it across the board for their patients, which for me has always been a... Well, it's become a red flag at a certain point where I saw if a doctor had a protocol, I was like, no way. I'm not doing it, because I know that

those don't tend to go well for me. So I think that, yeah, most doctors had a series of herbs, supplements, that sort of thing. Some incorporated colonics. But in my case, those were all too...

Mike Bender:

It was just too fast and too harsh. And so, yeah, I think when you get people that are this sensitive, it has to really be tailored to them and to their bodies, and the doctors, I think it's important that these doctors listen to the patients and really hear how they're reacting to things, because a lot of times doctors just want to go with the program they have, and that I think can create a lot of pain for people and certainly did for me over the years.

Andy Pace:

It's that one size fits all approach that gets people in trouble. Right.

Mike Bender:

Exactly.

Andy Pace:

And I see the same thing from a standpoint of being a healthy home consultant. I have a client I'm working with right now and we had a meeting just a few days ago with the builder and architect, and they want a list of all the materials I recommend for the home, and which is fine. I can put that together once we develop that list with the clients. I can't take what I used in your home for instance, and I'll give it to them and say, here's what you need to use because that's that one size fits all approach and you're going to get people sick.

Mike Bender:

Yeah, I think the one size fits all fits with, you told me about anything that any products that are made to get things done faster, right? And once that fits all, I don't know. I see a similarity there, and when you're trying to cut corners in any way, I think you get into trouble.

Andy Pace:

Right. That's for sure. It makes me think of, years ago, there was a probably the most well known consultant. Well, what I do now is... A man by the name of John Bower. And John Bower wrote a book about building healthy homes because he built a healthy home for his wife who was extremely sensitive. She was like the plastic bubble type sensitive. And so John designed and built a home that she could live in. And it was wonderful. Wrote a book about it, sold thousands of copies, became a very well known consultant. Today, he's a photographer. He's completely out of the industry because he got sued so many times. Not his fault.

He described what worked for him and for his wife. People followed that to a T, and were discouraged when they didn't have the same results that she had. And John was a pioneer and, but unfortunately, sometimes the pioneers have the arrows in their backs and they learn the hard way. And John is a friend. He's a customer of mine. And look at him as being my mentor in this business. I wish he could still do what he used to do, but he got so discouraged because of people's just assuming that it's going to work for them because they took that one size all approach.

Mike Bender:

Yeah. I relate to that in a lot of ways from the other side, which is there is a responsibility that one takes even as the patient or the person that is having the issues to know that there is

nobody that can tell them exactly what's going to work. Even you, Andy, when we're working together, if you're suggesting a product or something, there's no way you know whether I'm going to react to that.

Andy Pace:

Correct.

Mike Bender:

Whether it be flooring or whatever it might be. And so I think that that's it's unfair to do that even to a doctor and I don't do that to doctors either, meaning they're going to suggest stuff. And then I have to make that assessment. And then I have to also know how to understand myself enough to know that, okay, if I'm going to take this supplement, I'm going to take it with just a drop of powder first. I'm not going to take the whole thing and then have this violent reaction. Well, if I can do it, just a tiny bit. And like, I think you said to me with the flooring, which I really related to, if I'm using that drop of powder metaphor, which was I'm going to send you a sample of the flooring, bring it in your home, smell it, see how you feel, test it out.

Andy Pace:

Sleep next to it for a few nights.

Mike Bender:

Sleep next to it for a few nights. Absolutely. I think that's key. I think that it has to be a partnership when you go into these things. I thought you and I worked really, really well together, and you just said some things right off the bat that made me so comfortable with you in terms of not aiming for perfection, knowing that we're not going to nail everything. We're not

going to eliminate a hundred percent toxicity. That's impossible. But really focusing on the big things and the things that we're going to make the biggest impact. And that made a lot of sense to me. It took the pressure off of feeling like I have to cover every base. And so, yeah. So I think John, in some ways, like you said, is a victim of just being one of the first people out there.

Mike Bender:

And also probably John didn't even know enough at that time to make those disclaimers about, because not enough people had come through and tried these things. So, I feel for him in that way, because obviously he was going through what I've gone through and trying to deal with someone who's having all these mysterious reactions and hypersensitivities, and he figured a lot of stuff out, it sounds like. And so it's nice at least for you to be able to give that credit to him no matter what he's doing now just to say, hey, that got someone like you involved and look at all the good you're doing.

Andy Pace:

You brought up something that I wanted to discuss, and that is the fact that everybody is different. And we've been talking about this as not using a cookie cutter or a one size fits all approach. This is really the reason why the building industry as a whole can't adopt what I would call healthy home, whether its rules, regulations, whatever you want to call it. You can do green. Green is a little easier because you can actually set a limit for things like VOCs that contribute to outdoor pollution. You can set limits on energy usage. You can set standards for recycled content, recyclability, so forth. But when it comes to human health, there is no one size fits all approach. And so every job has to be looked at differently. And you're the perfect case

for that, because what we use for you, we can't use for the next person automatically. And so this is why the industry just doesn't have anything that fits you.

Mike Bender:

Yeah. Especially with anyone that's hypersensitive, it's like our hypersensitivities behave differently. And whereas I can do well with this flooring, like you said, someone else might not even do well with the smell of wood. It's not necessarily that it's toxic. And I think you and I were talking about this yesterday about that word. When you're dealing with someone who's hypersensitive, it's not even necessarily the toxic things that set that person off. In my case, my wife's lavender shampoo created problems for me. My mast cells reacted to that inappropriately. But the point is, is when the body is, and the limbic system in the brain are that keyed up, they will start reacting to anything that sets off an alarm.

So a strong smell, while it may be natural and not necessarily harmful for the body, sets off the exact same alarms as something toxic, and it still puts that person into fight or flight. So, that is where you really have to understand yourself and someone like you, there's no way you're going to know that until, like you said, you have that conversation with that person, so you can really understand, well, what are the types of things that are creating the problems for you.

Andy Pace:

So this brings me to a phrase that you created, which I absolutely love, what you call a quiet home and you just put that out there about it doesn't have to be a toxin. It doesn't have to be a poison. It's something that causes harm to you in a different way. And so you call out living in a quiet home. So for people who have read the article men's health magazine, or you haven't,

this is where Mike talks about this. But if you can just describe to us, and it's a wonderful phrase, how did you come up with that?

Mike Bender:

Well, I want to give credit always where credit is due and my electrician, who was just an amazing guy as well on the project, his name is William Holland, he had told me this story originally he was Holland Electrical or something. And he rode in an elevator with a guy who said, your company name has to say more than that. It has to say what you believe. And he changed his company name to My Quiet Home. And I remember he told me this the very first time we met and I just really connected with that image or that sense of a house that was not necessarily, it wasn't about healthy, it was about quiet across the board.

Quiet in terms of smells, sounds, EMFs, toxins, everything as close to that feeling we get when we're in a tent and we're out in nature and we feel refreshed and we feel rejuvenated and we are able to realign all those things happen in a quiet place. And I think I just love that analogy for the home. And it just really spoke to me. And so that became the goal was to create a house where I could heal. And that was the best way for me to think about it.

Andy Pace:

I love it. I think it captures the mental image. If you think of a home that is riddled with mold or electromagnetic pollution or chemical pollution, it's noise. It's all noise in the brain. It's noise in the body. You get this feeling of this buzzing sensation and anybody who has sensitivity understands that it's, you had mentioned before, triggering. The triggering nature of it, it just causes the body to tense and the idea of a quiet home where it's comforting, your brain can relax, your limbic system can relax, like you say, you feel like you are outside in the middle of

nature, just being at one with the earth and allowing your body to finally step down a bit and relax. I love that.

Mike Bender:

I think, yeah. And you just said it, everything from the standpoint of the nervous system is noise when it comes to things that are aggravating the nervous system. And as someone who has lived it, it is fascinating to see what falls into that noise bucket. It's a lot of things you wouldn't think, but the sound of your... and sometimes it is literal noise. The sound of my AC compressor outside, my limbic system's picking that up. The sound of my children when they're yelling at each other, that absolutely aggravates the nervous system. Music with lyrics versus classical music, I could put on classical music when I was at my worst, it felt soothing. The minute I had music with lyrics, it was too much. My brain couldn't process it. Smells, those are noise. We get into EMF and that nervous system is picking that stuff up that is also interpreted as noise for the nervous system. So that's why I tried to explain it to people because obviously EMFs trip people up and there's debate over it, but I don't see it any differently as those other things. It's just another version of noise.

Andy Pace:

So as you just mentioned, you're living in this home with a family and I assume your family members don't have the same sensitivities you have. They may have their own, right?

Mike Bender:

Yep.

Andy Pace:

How are they able to cope with this and have they changed some of the things that they do to help you?

Mike Bender:

Well, it's a process, right? Because anybody going through this, when you're first dealing with the sensitivities, it's off putting for everybody at first. It becomes a huge inconvenience to everyone around you. And yes, to answer your question just quickly, nobody in my family is dealing with the sensitivities I am, because nobody has the same profile. Nobody started with Lyme. And so they have normal day to day sensitivities, but nothing like what I experience.

And so I had to ask a lot of my family and my loved ones, my parents too, to accommodate me as I was healing. And that was tricky to explain that to people, especially before I understood it myself. Right. Because all you know is I'm reacting. I don't know why, why am I reacting when my wife comes out of the shower and she's just put on the shampoo? I have no idea. I didn't understand that. But as soon as I understood that it all coming from the limbic system and that the limbic system was throwing out these signals to the rest of my body and my nervous system, then I could explain it to them in a way that wasn't just me reacting emotionally to, hey, this is putting me in fight or flight.

Mike Bender:

Because by the way, when you're in fight or flight, you don't express things probably in the best way. You are in fight or flight. So things might come off in the wrong way. And so when I was able to understand it in that way, I could explain it more calmly. And I was able to, I think, make them see that this was creating a problem for me. And so my wife stopped using the

shampoo and we got rid of Wi-Fi, which of course I remember at the time feeling so guilty about that. But looking back, I feel like I did in that case, it was something that I'm really happy about for my kids.

Mike Bender:

I feel like I did something healthy for them by removing that from our environment. In terms of the shampoos and things like that, yeah, no, it's a pain in the ass for everybody around you. And I had to work through my own guilt about that. I talk about that in the article. That was very, very hard to ask all this stuff of your family all the time. And it's not like you're asking one thing a week, Andy. Every day there's things setting me off. And you just want to hide from yourself. You want to lock yourself in a box and just stay there.

Of course the CO2 levels would get really high in that box as you know, Andy. And then that would set off your nervous system. So even that doesn't work, but yeah, it is a massive challenge for anybody going through, anyone who's chemically sensitive. But the thing that I would stress to people and the most important thing was understanding that connection to the limbic system, as soon as you recognize that this isn't, I'm dying or something awful is happening, it's my brain actually trying to help me, to warn me, to alert me. And when you're able to shift that perspective, it doesn't become as scary.

Mike Bender:

It doesn't change the fact that it's uncomfortable, but it's not as scary because you know where it's coming from. And then the second thing I just want to make sure I say is that when you're dealing with these type of sensitivities, you so crave compassion from the people around you, from your loved ones. They're confused. They don't know what the hell's going on because you

don't know what the hell's going on. So you have to acknowledge the fact that they are totally confused by what's going on. And they're scared too. I think that you have to find that compassion for yourself first.

Mike Bender:

You have to be able to put your arms around yourself and say, I really, really, really support and love myself right now going through this. If you can find that compassion for yourself first, you can start to heal and you can also take the pressure off looking for that compassion from others, which can be a very frustrating experience. So I know I just went into a long diatribe about compassion and love and I'm sorry, Andy, because it has nothing to do with building, but I just think those are the things when I look back that took me a long time to get to. And if someone can get there a little faster, that'll make it worth it.

Andy Pace:

Yeah. Please don't apologize. I appreciate you sharing that. I know it's difficult to talk about, but it's important for people to hear because I hear it from my clients all over the world that even if they are married and have a family, they feel like they're on their own. And going through life with this debilitating disease or set of issues, whatever you want to call it...

Mike Bender:

Challenges. Yeah.

Andy Pace:

Challenges. It's tough enough, but to be doing it on your own and to have everybody around you just assuming you're nuts, it's got to be horrible. And so I really appreciate you sharing that because I really think that's very important for people to hear. Thank you.

Mike Bender:

Yeah, I'm glad, I'm glad. And just going off of what you just said, this sense that you're nuts, which comes up I think for everybody that goes through this, it is important, if anybody's listening right now, to know if you're going through this, you are not nuts. You are not crazy. You are not imagining things. Again, this is coming from real brain science. There is a limbic system, a reptilian part of your brain that has been wired for thousands and thousands of years, that is there with the sole purpose of protecting you and taking care of you and keeping you alive. And that is what you're feeling and what you're hearing 99% of the time. And so I think the more you can do some research into that, I think the more it's going to comfort you.

Andy Pace:

So Mike, we could probably go on for about another three hours. But I know right now, you're sitting outside your home and it's a little cool. So we're going to cut this a little shorter. What's next? And I know that you have, the article came out and I know there are other podcasts that you've been on and you're getting this out, but what's next with this?

Mike Bender:

Well, right before I say that, I want to thank you again, because I just want to say that in some ways I got more compassion from you than I got from those around me. Especially at the time when I embarked on this, when I didn't have as much of a brain as I do now, I couldn't even

have had this discussion with you a year ago. And so, I thank you. Not only for your expertise in terms of knowing what to tell me to do with the building process, but also for that compassion that you show people when they call you and they're in the midst of it.

Mike Bender:

And when they're in the midst of it, they're in a fog. And so when somebody can give them that kindness at the very beginning, say, hey, we're going to work through this. We're going to get through it. That is a huge, huge comfort to help them along the way. So thank you for that, Andy. In terms of what is next. I think that the article's just come out, I have heard from hundreds of people have written me either to my email or my Instagram, I am still not spending a ton of time on my devices. So I have to move very slowly responding to these people. But the first thing is I want to respond to the people who have reached out.

So many have said, I could have written this article in the exact same words that you did, which was really interesting to me, just the amount of people who have reached out. So I want to respond to them. I want to make sure that people know that they're not alone. And that was the point of the article was to really document this in a way where people could feel like they had something to show to someone else that may think they're crazy to say, hey, this person documented it, and here it is. And you can sit down and read it and understand it. So I think that's the goal. I am a writer. I am a children's book writer.

Mike Bender:

I tend to now want to go and create just fictional projects. I don't want to dwell on my health. I think it was important to write this article and to spread the awareness about it and about healthy building. But I want to go and can continue to be an artist. That's what makes me

happy. That's what gives me joy. I think talk and continuing to talk about something also reinforces it for your own brain and limbic system. And it's not something I want to keep doing. So at a certain point I'll move on and I think that's all of our goals, right. Is to go and enjoy life and to taste the whiskey and to be, and to connect with nature and do all these wonderful things. So, I think that's probably where my journey takes me.

Andy Pace:

That's wonderful. That's fantastic. I totally love that approach because dwelling on something for the sake of dwelling on it is not healthy and building from that, using that experience in life and moving on. And most importantly, getting back to what your passion is.

Mike Bender:

Yes.

Andy Pace:

That's all we can all ask for. So, Mike, thank you very much. It's always good to talk to you. You're not just a client of mine, but you're a friend and I really appreciate the time we have to talk.

Mike Bender:

Well, the love is mutual and I will forever be grateful for everything you did. And I feel good knowing that you're out there to help the next Mike Bender that calls.

Andy Pace:

Fabulous. All right, Mike, thank you very much for being here today.

Mike Bender:

Okay. Thank you, Andy.

Andy Pace:

There you go, folks. A little bit of time spent with Mike Bender and I really appreciate him sharing his time with us. And I hope you enjoyed the conversation. Look forward to having him back on in the future to discuss how things are moving along for him in the new home. And just so you know, I'm going to be posting the link to the men's health article in the show notes, and I'll also post a link to Mike's Instagram, and so you can follow along in his journey. If you like the show and you'd like to hear more things like this, please let us know. Go out to iTunes and give us a thumbs up. And in a five star rating, maybe even leave us a review and let us know what you thought of this. We'd greatly appreciate that. It helps other people find the show and spread these messages out as far and wide as we can. Once again, hope you enjoyed the episode. We look forward to coming back to you soon with another addition of Non Toxic Environments. Take care, everyone.