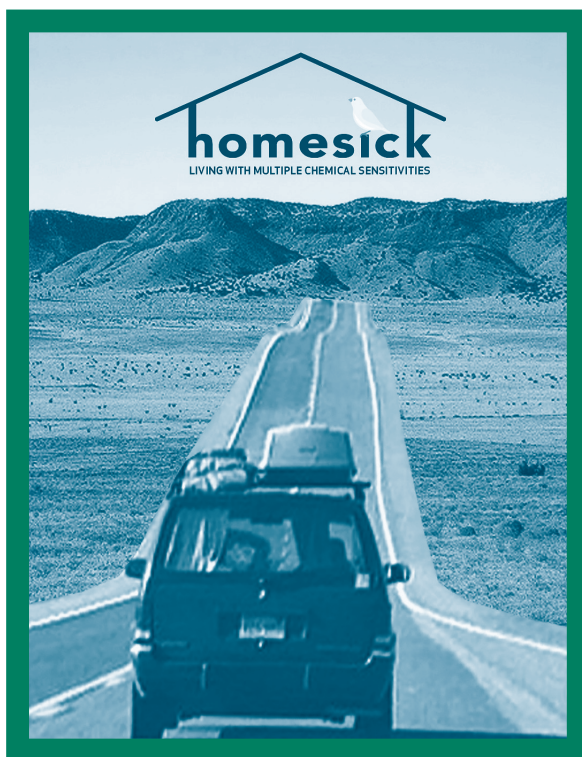




HUMAN  
ECOLOGY  
ACTION  
LEAGUE

# The Human Ecologist

*Chemicals Can Affect Your Health*



## Homesick: MCS documentary wins kudos

Antibiotic-resistant bacteria — a looming health crisis?

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‘We need to act against chemical brain drain’



Early-life BPA exposure and prostate cancer



A writer discovers that how she views her MCS affects her life

BY DIANE THOMAS


## Susan Abod: Learning to Love (and Film) Her ‘Life the Way It Is’

Susan Abod’s second film, *Homesick*, a documentary about living with multiple chemical sensitivities (MCS), is very, very good. Not good-for-a-film-made-by-someone-with-MCS, but good, period. It’s 56 minutes long and can be purchased at [homesick-video.com](http://homesick-video.com). Her first film, the 64-minute documentary *Funny, You Don’t Look Sick: An Autobiography of an Illness*, premiered at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and won a Merit Award at the 2005 SUPERFEST International Disability Film Festival.

Film is collaborative creativity. It involves putting together a talented team, raising the needed money, having a vision, and translating it into a story worth watching – and having the technical skills to pull it off. Making a film is hard work. Making a good film is nigh unto impossible. Making a good film about MCS when you also *have* MCS – much less two films – is, well, virtually unimaginable.

And yet Susan Abod makes it sound so easy.





*"I realized I had to learn to  
love my life as it is."*

In the early 1980s, doing administrative work at MIT by day and moonlighting as an up-and-coming jazz singer on the Boston club scene, she was very close to living her dream. "I was leading an artist's life," she says simply, the words evoking a glorious Bohemian existence. Her reviews, as both singer and songwriter, were excellent. The *Boston Herald* pronounced her songs "...[I]nfused with an intimacy and a zest for living."

Then in 1986, after recurring bouts of what seemed "a really bad flu," it all crashed down around her. She was diagnosed with CFIDS (chronic fatigue immune deficiency syndrome) and a year later with MCS. She had to face the fact that her life as she had known it was gone, probably forever. Out of that came the gift of an epiphany: "I realized I had to learn to love my life as it is," she said.

She determined to go back to school and get her Master's in counseling, something she thought she could do from her home or a safe office. She got through the course work okay, and thought she had found a building she could tolerate to do her practicum, but the clients she had to see to fulfill her degree requirement all wore fragrance. She could not work with them without getting "brain fog" and, hence, could not complete her degree, a distinct setback to her plans.

In July, 1993, she saw an Academy Award-nominated HBO documentary feature, *Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter*, about a two-year weekly video diary on a Vancouver television station, delivered by a physician dying of AIDS—and her life changed.

"He was just so out there with his condition and the way he talked about it. He was fighting stereotypes, breaking down social taboos, and helping viewers to better understand the disease. People supported him so much for that. He kept recording his pieces as his health visibly declined. It was really powerful. I wanted to do something like that for MCS," she said.

What she did was *Funny, You Don't Look Sick*. She wrote a synopsis for it in 25 minutes, talked her local cable-access TV station into letting her borrow some cable equipment, hired one of the station's editors, and got to work.

"I learned the ropes from a former WGBH-TV editor who became the director of the film," she recalled. Susan also learned that her timing was that of a musician, a decided asset to a filmmaker and something that lends to Abod's work its unique style.

When the film was finished and presented to the public, the *Chicago Tribune* hailed it as "A fine documentary on an important theme." The reviewer for the *Boston Herald* wrote



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that it "...invites the healthy and the disabled to recognize a common will to endure and prevail. This autobiographical video is not the product of a victim. It is the self-discovery of a survivor."

During the editing of *Funny, You Don't Look Sick*, Susan began to ask herself how many others were going through the same nightmare she was. How were others coping with the problem? Were they having as much trouble as she was in finding a safe place to live? Did finding safe housing improve their health? Was one part of the country safer than another?

Out of these questions came *Homesick*, in which she went on a road trip to try to find answers to her questions. She traveled from her home state of Massachusetts to New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Texas, parts of the country to which many people with MCS have migrated in search of less industrialized environments. She met chemically sensitive architects, teachers, housewives, social workers, nurses, doctors, lawyers and students. She visited their homes—homes that included a stilt house, several tents, a straw bale house, a teepee, retrofitted trailers, retrofitted houses, and a few new homes made of wood, glass and steel. She witnessed

their occupants' daily struggles.

In total, she interviewed some 40 people, including Dr. Erica Elliott, who sees chemically sensitive patients in her Santa Fe home; architect Paula Baker, who co-authored with Dr. Elliott the book *Prescriptions for a Healthy House*; Linda Reinhardt, an ordained minister who established a spiritual community for people with MCS (and one of two interview subjects to whom the film is dedicated because they died before its release), and a man living in an airstream trailer where two previous occupants with MCS had taken their own lives. Most of Susan's subjects are female, which reflects the pattern of the illness: For reasons not yet adequately scientifically explained, it strikes women far more frequently than men. The similarities in all her subjects' stories were staggering. Finding safe housing was invariably their biggest challenge.

Her filming was funded in large part by an ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) Mini Grant. It paid for a camerawoman who drove the van they traveled in. Sometimes Susan stayed in the homes of people with MCS.

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*"By the time you realize that your new carpet is making you sick, or the chemicals you're exposed to at work, it's too late..."*



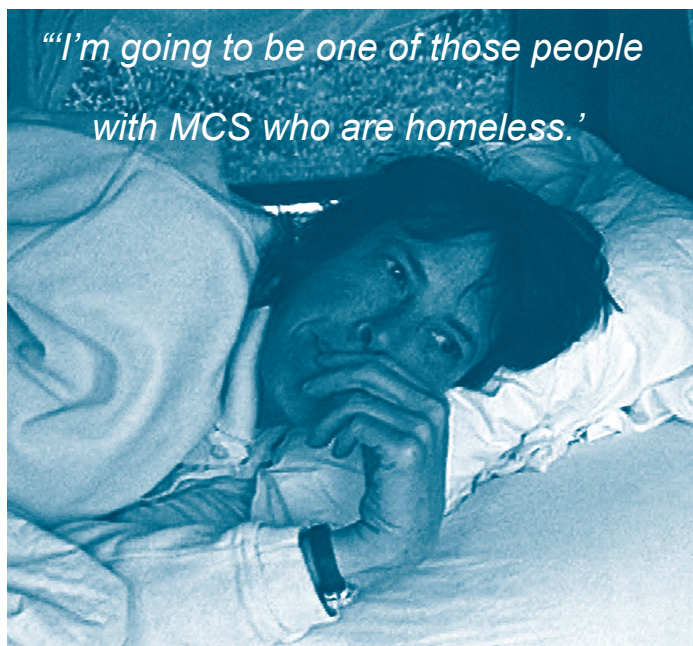
Susan Abod

Other times she slept in the van.

"I was overwhelmed by what I saw," she said. "We shot 24 hours of film." The final cut is 56 minutes long. Ultimately, it is aimed at the population as a whole: MCS can strike anyone; all it requires is that they be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The message Susan wants most to get out is that we should all be aware of this and live accordingly.

"By the time you realize that your new carpet is making you sick, or the chemicals you're exposed to at work, it's too late," she explained.

During the filming, Susan had her own housing crisis and for two years had to stay with a chemically sensitive friend while she looked for her own safe place. In video-diary style, she filmed herself when the house she finally rented and believed would work for her made her too sick to stay in it. (She is the only person shown in the film when their symptoms flared, an artistic decision she made out of respect for her interview subjects.) At one point she broke down and cried, "I'm going to be one of those people with MCS who are homeless." I really didn't want to go there."



After six more months of additional labor and time, she was finally able to tolerate and live in the house she had chosen.

Eleven years after her road trip, sick and out of money, she confessed to a friend that she feared the film would never be completed. Her friend introduced her to a Seattle producer, Basil Shadid, who had worked as post-production coordinator on the Academy Award-nominated documentary "Iraq in Fragments." He agreed to help Susan complete the film. The finished product is touching, informative, and affecting—and thoroughly professional.

Susan has lived in a safe house now for six years. When her health allows, she has been able to sing again. The *Alilbi*, an entertainment newspaper in Albuquerque, New Mexico, wrote after one of her appearances: "Blessed with a clear, expressive voice, daring playfulness and an empathetic heart, Abod filled the songs with a lively presence that was irresistibly unpredictable."

What is next for Susan?

Right now she's hard at work recording a CD of her own music. Four of the songs are featured in *Homesick*. "She's also looking for a safe community space in her neighborhood where people with MCS can gather. As for a new creative project?

She laughs. "I might try writing."

I don't doubt she'll make her mark there, too.

*Susan Abod now lives in New Mexico. A trailer for the 57-minute video, Homesick: Living with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities, is available free online at [homesick-video.com/](http://homesick-video.com/). The video can be rented for \$8.99 at the same Web site or purchased for \$19.99 plus shipping. (It also can be purchased at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) at the same price but ordering from the Homesick Web site is recommended.) Another option is for you to request that your local library purchase a copy of Homesick from Filmmakers Library, <http://www.filmmakers.com>. If your library agrees, it would support the video, make it available locally to people with MCS, and allow you to check it out free of charge.*

*Diane Thomas' novel In Wilderness is scheduled to be published in early 2015. She lives in New Mexico and is a former editor of The Human Ecologist.*