



At home a few days after a third round of chemotherapy earlier this month, Lea DiRusso seeks comfort from husband Amr Osman. (JESSICA GRIFFIN / Staff Photographer)

# Cancer in the classroom

Lea DiRusso was exposed to cancer-causing fibers while teaching at two asbestos-laden Philadelphia schools for nearly 30 years.

by [Wendy Ruderman](#) and [Kristen A. Graham](#), Updated: November 21, 2019

Every week during the school year, teacher Lea DiRusso climbed on a chair and hung her students' best work on a clothesline strung between two old heating pipes. As she tugged the line down to clip on artwork or an essay, it tightened, rubbing against the insulation and often sending down fine white flakes.

Her 90-year-old school, Meredith Elementary, had leaking pipes, damaged asbestos insulation, and peeling paint, but DiRusso brightened every corner of Classroom 206.5: homey curtains, peel-and-stick stained-glass patterns on the windows, classical music playing low.

"When you come into a room on a Monday morning, and you're starting to set up, and you see dust across your desk, or dust on the ground, or a ceiling tile fell, as a teacher, this is your pride and joy, it's your room," said DiRusso, a [28-year veteran of the Philadelphia School District](#). She would grab her school-issued broom. "You just scoop it up, you clean it up, and you move on."

Her fastidiousness, however, put her at greater risk of inhaling or ingesting cancer-causing asbestos fibers, according to medical experts. DiRusso's classroom had a history of damaged, unrepaired asbestos pipe insulation, School District records show.



*Lea DiRusso, right, waits for a consult with one of her doctors, with her husband Amr Osman, left.*

In late August, as she was settling her 18-year-old daughter into her freshman dorm room, DiRusso, 51, got an urgent phone call from her doctor: She had mesothelioma.

“I literally lost vision and hearing for a minute,” she said.

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### Lea DiRusso

Mesothelioma is a rare, aggressive cancer caused by asbestos. Roughly 3,000 people in the United States are newly diagnosed each year, and patients have a [median survival](#) of about one year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [Elementary school teachers](#) are at elevated risk, studies show. DiRusso has [peritoneal mesothelioma](#), which invades the lining of the abdomen.

After completing three rounds of chemotherapy that began in September, DiRusso had a decision to make: Should she endure a risky, drastic surgery to remove her diseased organs, then get flushed with “hot chemo”?

“It’s terrifying to me,” she said at the time.

## Teachers at greater risk

Mesothelioma is a cumulative disease. The level of risk increases based on the amount of exposure to asbestos and for how long, not unlike the link between chain-smoking cigarettes and lung cancer.

While DiRusso may have been exposed to asbestos from other sources at other times in her life, four doctors interviewed by The Inquirer said her three decades of teaching at Meredith and Nebinger — two old South Philadelphia elementary schools with environmental issues — were likely a “significant contributing factor” to her cancer.

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Both [Meredith](#) and [Nebinger](#) are filled with asbestos building materials, and district documents show that environmental inspectors noted some of the asbestos as “newly friable,” or crumbling, and flagged it for repair. But the district didn’t get to it for months, or sometimes years, even though many of the spaces were occupied by students and staff. The Inquirer’s 2018 “[Toxic City: Sick Schools](#)” investigation revealed hazardous amounts of asbestos fibers in settled dust at seven elementary schools, including Nebinger, where DiRusso taught for 11 years before moving to Meredith in 2002.



### **JESSICA GRIFFIN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**

*Lea DiRusso says she tries not to cry in front of her daughter, Alysa Krause, 18, and her 16-year-old son, Ashton Krause (left), knowing she won't live to see them start their own families.*

“Her school exposure from materials that are in poor repair is likely to be one of the significant contributors. It isn't the only contributor, but it would be significant, especially if she was a longtime teacher,” said Henry A. Anderson, former chief medical officer and state epidemiologist for the Wisconsin Division of Public Health. “A lot of risk really depends upon, were you in an area where there was an unusual amount of dust generated? Or did you personally generate that dust, like sweeping with a broom?”

Because asbestos was so widely used in building materials, construction workers remain at the highest risk for mesothelioma, according to the CDC. Other high-risk occupations include shipbuilders, refinery workers — and teachers.

<https://www.inquirer.com/education/a/mesothelioma-philadelphia-school-district-lea-dirusso-cancer-20191121.html>