

# SHAPED BY ALLERGIES

My son's food restrictions have altered who we are. The surprise: much of it is change for the better.

by RUTH LOVETTSMITH

“I hate food allergies!” Justin said this as he stomped his foot, crossed his arms and pushed out his lower lip into an exaggerated pout. He was understandably upset about being excluded from a preschool classroom birthday party. Again. I was increasingly getting upset, too.

The expression “I hate food allergies,” has been a topic of conversation in our household for years. My non-allergic son muttered it whenever we had to forgo an unsafe food. I caught my husband whispering it upon trying to console Justin after being told he couldn't have a specific treat. I've tried not to say it, but have probably slipped and uttered the words out loud.

I'm not proud of our family's negative behavior, however a part of me feels justified. We've spent the last six years tiptoeing around food. We've read thousands of food labels. We've attended numerous school field trips. We've baked dozens of cupcakes for school celebrations. We've seen Justin suffer severe allergic reactions. We've tallied every negative aspect of living a life with food allergies because it has changed all of us. It has shaped who we are as a family and as individuals.

But only recently have I begun to reflect on how food allergies have shaped us in a positive way. Can anything good come from something so bad? Following are some of the lessons I've learned.

**Label reading is hard work.** Searching through a 20-item ingredient list to find the words egg or peanut is enough to cause a mom to go blind. After a couple of years I began to wonder: why was I buying processed foods with a 20-item ingredient list? Label reading has taught me what is in our food. We don't yet know the cause of food allergies, but I can only guess that additives and numerous other chemical



Justin (left) and his brother Logan on vacation in Hawaii.

ingredients can't help. We still read labels, but we buy far less processed food. That has cut down on the label reading and has improved our health. We've even started our own organic vegetable garden.

**School field trips can be a lot of fun.** Recently a girl in my son's class asked me: “Why do you go on every single field trip?” Before I could answer, she looked at Justin and said, “I wish my mom came on all of our field trips.” Justin smiled and said, “I love you, Mom.” His food allergies have brought us closer, creating some great memories we might never have had.

I didn't realize birthdays were celebrated in school until I was forced to bake safe cupcakes on a weekly basis. I didn't mind at first. In my eyes, a safe cupcake was better than no cupcake. Then Justin came home one day in tears. “Why didn't my friend's mom make a pirate cupcake for me, too?” he asked. Like many food allergy moms have done, we had the “everyone is different” talk.

**Then I started to pay attention.** Justin wasn't just excluded at classroom birthday parties. Since he would be in school for years, this wasn't an issue to ignore. I

addressed it with the appropriate staff members, and found the school resistant to change. It was out of my comfort zone, but I continued to discuss the issue with the school, the school committee and members of our community. It took more than two years, but the school district has finally introduced a food-free birthday policy. Before allergies, I never would have been able to address such a confrontational issue with so many people and actually see it through.

Recently, Justin volunteered to enroll in a peanut allergy clinical trial. I thought it was so he could miss school and eat all the junk food peanut-allergic kids never get to eat. Then he shared how excited he was to be a part of a potential cure: “I hope this treatment works so other kids won't have to deal with food allergies.” Is it possible my positive thinking was rubbing off?

**Don't get me wrong.** We'd certainly prefer to live without food allergies. And Justin still has his normal 8-year-old boy moments. He will still stomp his foot from time to time in protest over some food-related issue. Only now he rolls his eyes, sighs heavily and says, “I know Mom, it's not a safe food for me. Maybe when I outgrow my food allergies. For now, I'll just have something else.”

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