

Immunize Kansas Coalition Shares Stories from Kansas State Fair

September 30, 2024

In late September, the Immunize Kansas Coalition (IKC) exhibited at the Kansas State Fair for their second year. This 10-day event was an excellent opportunity for the IKC Community Health Specialists to share IKC’s mission, educational resources, and the role immunizations play in creating community immunity.

At the fair, Community Health Specialists engaged with Kansans from across the state, many of whom shared stories about the impact vaccine-preventable diseases have had on their lives. One booth visitor, Shawna, shared how mumps impacted her family.

In the 1930s, her grandfather Robert contracted mumps. Tragically, his brother, Ben also contracted mumps, developed pneumonia, and passed away at the young age of 20 years old in 1935. This was 36 years before the MMR vaccine that protects us from mumps today would become available.



Robert would go on to be a decorated World War II veteran and esteemed member of the community in Cheyenne County, KS. However, for the rest of his life, Robert was unable to shake the feeling that he was somehow responsible for his brother’s death.

After her grandfather’s passing, Shawna and her family were clearing out the family farm, when they found her Uncle Ben’s old violin in its case tucked away in the chicken coop. Shawna believes the violin was in the coop because Robert, or somebody else was so pained by its presence. When she was the same age as Ben at the time of his passing, Shawna was determined to honor the memory of him and her grandfather by restoring the violin.

When sharing her story, Shawna emphasized the importance of sharing personal experiences when discussing immunizations and the toll vaccine-preventable diseases can take on all lives.

“Even though I never got to meet Uncle Ben or my Grandfather, Francis- they both will live forever as heroes for the lives they saved: Francis saved so many during WWII, even with the guilt that he felt responsible for Ben’s death, and Ben is still saving lives today when we tell his story and people understand that we are only a generation or two away from these illnesses killing our children,” Shawna shared.

Today, we’re fortunate to have vaccines that protect us from harmful diseases like the MMR vaccine. Immunize Kansas Coalition continues to share stories from Kansans that highlight the vital role of immunizations in preventing diseases and protecting families and communities. Hear more personal testimonies in [IKC’s Honest Conversations campaign](#).



Photo taken by Shawna Shafer of her Uncle Ben’s gravestone. September 20, 1914 - April 11, 1935



Uncle Ben’s violin found hidden in the chicken coop.



Photo found at the Cheyenne County Museum. Ben Harrison (Uncle Ben), shown on the right.