

The Lancaster County Democrat

LANCASTER COUNTY
DEMOCRATS

January 2026

Blue Wave 2025! By Dennis Crawford

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**WHEN A TRUMP +12
DISTRICT TURNS BLUE AND
MIAMI ELECTS A
DEMOCRAT FOR THE FIRST
TIME IN 30 YEARS, THAT'S
NOT POLITICS — THAT'S A
COUNTRY REJECTING THE
CHAOS.**

Anonymous

BRIAN
TYLER
COHEN

Now that the 2025 elections are over, we can definitively say: This was a very good year for Democrats.

Shortly after Don Old Trump won a second term in November 2024, the conventional wisdom from the pundit class, the Republicans, and even some Democrats was that Republicans had won a permanent governing majority. They were of the mistaken belief that GOP gains among Latinos, men and young people were permanent in nature.

The same people who bought the theory of GOP triumphalism argued that the Democratic Party wasn't just defeated, it was destined to go the way of the Federalists and the Whigs. They contended that the Democratic Party was divided, demoralized and largely consisted of voters who were ready to withdraw from politics for a long time.

The reality that the doomsayers overlooked was that the 2024 election was very close. A change of 115,000 votes in three battleground states would have changed the outcome of the presidential election. The

Republicans won their very narrow majority in the House by a mere 7,309 votes across America. Nevertheless, the pundits, the GOP and even some Democrats wrote the premature political obituary of the Democratic Party.

In late 2024, I posted several blog pieces in which I presciently rejected this so-called conventional wisdom. I correctly pointed out that Trump was never popular during his first term and that a GOP crackup was inevitable due to their inability to govern. The Bush 43 and Trump 45 presidencies had both ended in disaster. I predicted that Trump 47 would be no different.

Then elections started happening in 2025 that proved that the so-called “conventional wisdom” was wrong. In January, Democrats flipped two Republican held legislative seats in Iowa in districts that had been carried by Trump by a wide margin.

The most significant early result occurred in the Wisconsin Supreme Court race on April 1 where the Democratic candidate won by 10 points after Elon Musk spent a whopping \$25 million. In Iowa and Wisconsin the Democrats out performed Harris by 10 to 20 points. The backlash to Trump began early.

The Trump backlash carried over to the elections in Lincoln and Omaha. In both cities, the Democrats won sweeping, landslide victories. It wasn't even close.

The first big win was in Lincoln on May 6. Here's how I described it in a post on Facebook on May 7:

“We came. We saw. We conquered!”

Lancaster County Democrats won a landslide election last night!

All three City Council incumbents were easily re-elected.

Bennie Shobe

Tom Beckius

Sandra Washington

We re-elected Barb Baier to the School Board.

John Goodwin, Maria Krivohlavek and Marilyn Johnson were elected to the School Board.

Vanessa Emlich was elected to the Airport Authority.

We won EVERY election! The Republicans won ZERO elections!

The Democrats control all of the local governmental units. Lincoln is a blue city!”

Now Republicans have told me that Lincoln is a blue city and the Democrats were always a lock. My rebuttal to that talking point is that the Republicans before that election result claimed that the Democrats were a dead party and the GOP had a permanent governing majority. If the Democrats were truly going the way of the Whigs, the Republicans would have won some elections in Lincoln. Instead, the Republicans lost every election. Every one of them.

We then had a political earthquake in Omaha on May 13 that shocked the world. Democrat John Ewing defeated three term incumbent GOP mayor Jean Stothert by a 57% to 43% margin. It was an epic upset that received national attention. Stothert had never had a close race in her three previous runs for mayor. She won her 2021 election with 65% of the vote. That was an amazing 21 point swing from four years previously.

The trend of Democratic over performance continued through the November elections. Abigail Spanberger won her race for governor in Virginia by 14 points and Mikie Sherrill also won the New Jersey governor's race by 14 points.

Spanberger and Sherrill both out performed Harris and the polls by a wide margin. In New Jersey, the Republicans nominated the best possible candidate and Karl Rove predicted that the Republican would win in New Jersey. It was not even close.

"Exit polls show that those elements of the electorate where Trump made startling gains in 2024 are now running away from him and from the GOP. In Virginia, Abigail Spanberger is winning 67 percent of under-30 voters, 64 percent of Latino voters, 61 percent of Asian American voters, and 90 percent of Black voters. Up in New Jersey, Mikie Sherrill is winning under-30 voters by better than 2-1, Latinos by exactly 2-1, Black voters by better than 10-1, and Asian American voters by better than 4-1. She's also winning 90 percent of Black men and 57 percent of Latino men. These are also demographic groups that have begun turning their back on Trump in job-approval polls." Ed Kilgore on November 5.

In the wake of the Democratic landslides in November, The Wall Street Journal declared that "The era of MAGA triumphalism should be over." Ted Cruz correctly stated that the elections were a "disaster for Republicans... It was an electoral blowout. The results in New Jersey were disastrous. The results in Virginia were terrible."

The next major test was the special U.S. House election in Tennessee CD-07 on December 2. While Democrat Aftyn Behn didn't pull off the upset, she did vastly out perform Harris' level in what should be a giant warning sign for the GOP. Behn out performed Harris by 13 points. What made the result significant

was that this over performance occurred in a midterm level turnout environment.

One House Republican privately bemoaned the results. "Tonight is a sign that 2026 is going to be a bitch of an election cycle," said the person, granted anonymity to freely discuss the election. "Republicans can survive if we play team and the Trump administration officials play smart. Neither is certain."

Retiring Rep. Don Bacon warned "the GOP should not ignore" how close it came to losing a district President Donald Trump won by 22 points in 2024 — not to mention the Democratic gubernatorial victories in Virginia and New Jersey in November.

The last two elections in 2025 occurred in Miami and in Georgia on December 2. Eileen Higgins won the Miami mayoral runoff election, becoming the first Democrat to be elected as mayor of the city in nearly 30 years. Higgins won a landslide by a 59% to 41% margin against a Republican opponent who was endorsed by Trump. The Republican candidate won the mayoral race in 2021 by 67 points. It was a 19% swing left from the 2024 presidential election.

Democrats also [won a surprise victory](#) in a Georgia state House district that voted for Trump last year by 12 points. The Democratic candidate defeated the Republican by a 51 percent to 49 percent margin. This Georgia victory followed on the heels of Democratic candidates who successfully flipped two seats on the Georgia Public Service Commission, their first non-federal statewide wins in the Peach State since 2006. After these results, one prominent Georgia Republican ruefully remarked that GOP donors and voters were not motivated.

In 2025, the Democrats either won or overperformed in 221 out of 249 key and special elections this year — nearly 90%. At the same time, Democrats flipped 21 percent of all the GOP-held legislative seats. According to *Bolts'* magazine, Democrats gained 25 state Senate and House seats that were held by the GOP, out of the 118 that were resolved this year in regular or special elections.

Now that the 2025 elections are over, we can definitively say: This was a very good year for Democrats. This blue wave has turned Don Old Trump into a lame duck. Quack! Quack! It would also explain the fact the some Republicans are finally standing up to Trump.

Some prominent Republicans are dreading next year's elections. "It's not a secret. There's no sugarcoating it. It's a pending, looming disaster heading our way. We are facing almost certain defeat." RNC Chair Joe Gruters said in a recent radio interview.

We are the favorites to retake the U.S. House and the U.S. Senate is in play. If we do the work, we will

win. Let us be remembered as the generation that saved the U.S. from fascism.

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**Goodbye 2025, Hello 2026
By Steve Kemper**

the Christmas Times

December 2025

BREAKING NEWS

TRUMP WINS 'NAUGHTY LIST' SUIT AT SUPREME COURT



Washington, D.C.

In a shocking holiday decision, the U.S. Supreme Court today ruled 6-3 in favor of Donald Trump in the landmark case of *Trump v. Kris Kringle, et al.* The Court found that Santa Claus does **not** have "absolute immunity" from defamation law regarding the annual "Naughty List."

The US Department of Justice launched an investigation last month after the host of the late-night talk show host, Jimmy Kimmel, suggested the president, along with his "cronies" were on Santa's naughty list. Mr. Trump's heated response on his social platform, Truth Social, sparked a deluge of AI-generated memes mocking the administration. One notable meme depicted the president as a fat Grinch, sitting on Cindy-Lou Who. Another put him in the beloved film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, as the infamous Mr. Potter laughing at George Bailey.

The DOJ found that in fact, Mr. Trump and many in his cabinet are on The Naughty List and have been for years. Mr. Trump in particular has been on the list since he was five-years old. Mr. Trump's legal team argued that his repeated inclusion on Santa's Naughty List constituted "irreparable damage to his personal and political brand."

"This is a massive, tremendous victory for the American people... and a total disaster for the totally corrupt North Pole establishment," Trump posted online mere minutes after the decision. "Santa Clause (sic) has been lying for years. TOTAL EXONERATION!"

Writing for the majority, Justice Clarence Thomas noted that the Constitution's protection of free speech does not extend to *knowingly false* defamatory statements, even from a non-corporeal entity. The Court ordered Santa to immediately disclose his criteria and auditing process for Naughty List placements.

Justice Sonia Sotomayor wrote a passionate dissent, calling the ruling an "absurdity of the highest order" and

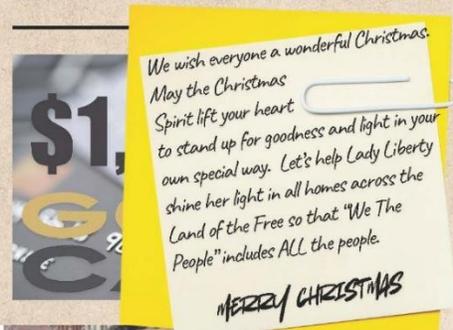
a "constitutional lump of coal" that threatens the very fabric of childhood joy.

Thousands demonstrated their support for Santa, gathering outside the steps of justice buildings across the country while the court debated.

Moments after the decision, the crowds began singing. Every news outlet from CNN to NewsMax, and every podcast, and social media echo the same festive voices of the masses chanting, "You better watch out, you better not shout, you better not pout, I'm telling you why—Santa Claus is coming to town!"

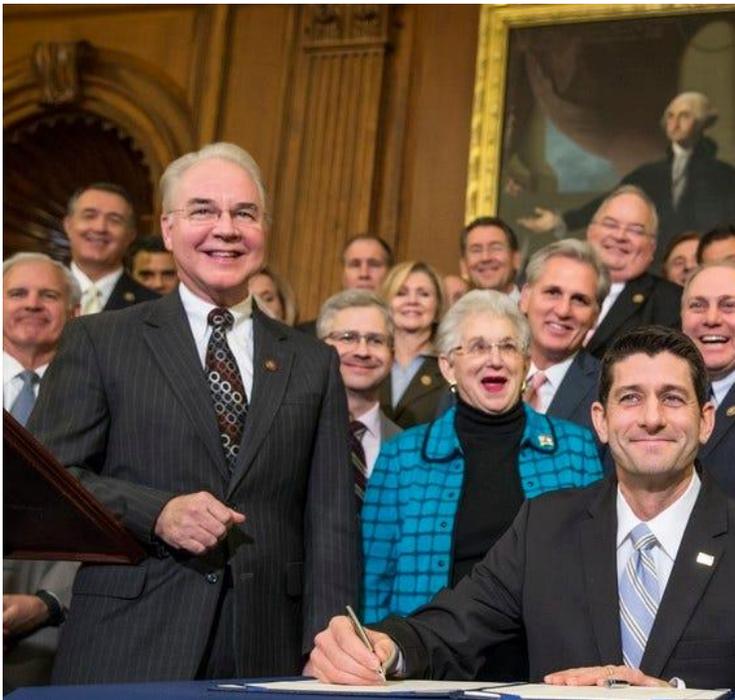
The North Pole issued a statement through an anonymous source: "This changes nothing. He knows what he did."

—BARRIE & DAPHNE



Republican Sabotage of the ACA Has Spiked Premiums

By Dennis Crawford



Republicans celebrating after they repealed the ACA without a replacement plan during the Obama administration.

Conservatives opposed Medicare, Medicaid and the ACA. Ronald Reagan said that Medicare would end freedom in America. John Boehner claimed that the ACA would cause “Armageddon.”

The reality is that conservatives simply don’t believe that it’s a legitimate function of government to fund health care for senior citizens, the poor and the sick. They are philosophically opposed to it. Conservatives believe that government exists to aid the wealthy and corporations in the mistaken belief that it will all trickle down.

This is why conservatives have opposed every expansion of health care and every other progressive reform. This would also explain why Republicans have sabotaged the ACA since its passage even though it’s now popular and an integral part of the health care system.

Private health insurance companies simply can’t make money insuring the elderly, the poor and the sick. That’s why we have Medicare, Medicaid and the ACA. The only way to insure these people is for the government to provide the funding. If conservatives had their way, over 150 million additional Americans would be uninsured. On the other hand, the rich would have a lower tax rate. Priorities.

Republican sabotage of the ACA has resulted in the higher health insurance premiums that we’re paying.

I don’t do this very often but I’m going to post an article by someone else to give it more exposure. This is an important issue. We can’t let the Republicans get away with blaming us for soaring health insurance premiums.

Article by Paul @skylinereport that I found on X/Twitter.

REPUBLICANS BUILT THE COST SPIKES THEY’RE NOW BLAMING ON THE ACA

The evidence is overwhelming: **rising ACA premiums aren’t some cosmic accident — they are the predictable, engineered outcome of Republican policy choices** designed to cripple the law without owning the fallout.

1. The Individual Mandate Repeal: The Original Sabotage Bomb

Republicans knew — and every economist in America told them — that the ACA’s risk pool only works if healthy people stay insured. Repealing the mandate created the exact death spiral they had been predicting... because they caused it.

- Healthy people left the market
- Sick people stayed
- Premiums surged

Republicans then ran victory laps shouting, “See! Obamacare is collapsing!” Mother of god.

2. Cutting Cost-Sharing Reductions: The Single Dumbest Fiscal Move in Modern Health Policy

Trump cut CSR payments to insurers in 2017. Every expert said this would backfire. They were right.

Result: • Insurers jacked up premiums on silver plans (“silver loading”) • Federal subsidies skyrocketed • Taxpayers paid MORE • The unsubsidized middle class got *hammered*

This wasn’t policy. It was vandalism at scale.

3. Flooding the Market with Junk Plans: Deregulate, Destabilize, Distract

Short-Term Limited Duration plans were never insurance. They were actuarial ghost pepper spray.

Republicans expanded them so that healthy people would flee ACA plans. That shrank the risk pool again — surprise! — causing more premium spikes.

Who got screwed? • Anyone with cancer • Anyone pregnant • Anyone with diabetes • Anyone who needed actual healthcare

These “plans” offered low premiums because they covered nothing and dumped the sick back onto the ACA markets. Premiums rose *again*.

4. Every GOP “Replacement Plan” Is a Cost-Shifting Machine

Let’s review:

AHCA (2017):

- 23 million more uninsured • Old people priced out • Pre-existing conditions gutted • Medicaid gutted

Crapo–Cassidy Plan (2025):

- Replace ACA subsidies with HSAs and high deductibles • Works for the healthy • Devastates the sick • Explodes state budgets

High-Risk Pools:

Republicans love them because they’ve never run one. Every historical example is a horror show:

- 200–300% premiums • Years-long waitlists • Caps on chemo, transplants, and hospital days • Insolvent by design

These “solutions” succeed at exactly one thing: **making care unaffordable unless you are wealthy, young, or lucky.**

5. The Coming Spike in 2026 Premiums? That’s the GOP Subsidy Cliff They Built

Republicans refused to extend the ACA subsidy expansion. If subsidies vanish:

- Millions lose affordable coverage • Premiums jump overnight • Deductibles spike • Uninsured rate skyrockets

This is not an unintended consequence. This is the blueprint.

THE CORE TRUTH

Republicans spent a decade smashing every stabilizing mechanism the ACA relied on — the mandate, subsidies, guardrails, risk pooling — and now want applause for pointing at the wreckage they made.

They didn’t “fail to fix healthcare.”

They **succeeded** in making it more expensive.

Because when premiums rise, they get to blame Democrats and demand more deregulation that — surprise — makes costs rise again.

It’s a **policy doom loop**, and they built it.

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Article by Paul @skylinereport

The mysterious death of a teen at Pillen Family Farms

By Yanqi Xu, Flatwater Free Press

A 17-year-old worker died at a Nebraska hog farm run by the governor's family. Two investigations later, the boy's mother is still searching for answers.

Zach Panther hadn't yet figured out his future: whether to pursue college or find a job in a nearby city. To put away some money, his mother encouraged him to work at a hog farm outside his hometown of St. Edward.

Pulling early morning shifts, the 17-year-old helped with maintenance at Beaver Valley Pork, one of the nearly 100 farms owned by Pillen Family Farms, the largest pork producer in the state. The company was founded in 1993 by Jim Pillen, now Nebraska's governor.

On April 1, 2024, just six weeks into the job, Zach used spray foam to seal up cracks in a barn, then did inventory in a maintenance room. When he didn't show up for lunch, his supervisor went looking for him — and found him collapsed on the floor.

None of the dozen or so other employees witnessed his death, according to a report by the Boone County Sheriff's Office, and there was no evidence of foul play. Monthslong inquiries by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, a federal agency, and the county coroner's office did not determine how Zach died.

Those investigations, however, were hampered by limited information sharing by the agencies, missteps and missed opportunities, The New York Times and the Flatwater Free Press found.

The sheriff, his deputies and a Nebraska state trooper examined the room where Zach had died, but looked at little else on the property. The farm, which would raise concerns about a potential air quality issue, blocked OSHA from conducting timely tests. An agency medical officer suspected that Zach had died from an immune response to a chemical in a spray foam, and recommended a test, but the lab contracted by the coroner's office accidentally destroyed the only suitable blood sample.

"The type of investigation that really should have been done wasn't done," said Dr. Erin Linde, the forensic pathologist who conducted Zach's autopsy.

Not all deaths can be explained, medical examiners caution. But Zach's mother, Justy Riggs-Panther, could not understand how officials were unable to provide a cause for the sudden death of a teenager at an industrial-scale farm. This fall, she requested a tissue sample from her son's autopsy for independent testing, but the county attorney refused to release it.

“My son is dead,” Riggs-Panther said in an interview. “There ought to be answers.”

Zach’s death shook St. Edward, a town of 720 about 120 miles west of Omaha. And the mystery about how it happened has stirred questions, concerns and rumors. “There’s no explanation, no rhyme or reason,” said Renata Ketelsen, whose daughter was a classmate of Zach’s. “Just this healthy young man is gone.”

In many workplace deaths, OSHA is charged with identifying safety violations and preventing future harm. Several former agency officials from other states who reviewed the Omaha office’s report criticized its work in the case as not thorough, and said that the office should have cited the farm for failing to protect employees from hazardous chemicals.

OSHA concluded that there had been no workplace violations at the farm. Courtney Parella, the assistant secretary for public affairs at the U.S. Department of Labor, defended the investigation in a statement, saying it was thorough and “supported by multiple consultations with medical experts.”

While [teenage workers die in agricultural settings more often than in other](#) workplaces, OSHA has far less latitude to inspect or cite farms for safety violations. The farm lobby has won exemptions to many OSHA regulations, allowing practices deemed punishable in other industries to persist on farms.

There should be steps, Riggs-Panther said, “to make sure that nothing else happens to anybody else.” “This is the family business’

Sarah Pillen, the governor’s daughter and co-chief executive of Pillen Family Farms, said the business had “fully cooperated” with the inquiries. In a written statement, she added, “While we share the frustration that some of the issues which led to his passing remain unanswered, we understand those investigations have been closed, and there have been no safety violations attributable to the workplace.”

Sarah Pillen informed OSHA of Zach’s death at 6:30 p.m. on the day he died. In the call log, an agency employee jotted down phrases like “had been foaming — insulation,” “head injury” and “poss. medical episode.”

The next day, OSHA sent Philip Pisasale, a veteran industrial hygienist, to inspect the farm. Thousands of pigs are kept in enclosed barns, and ventilation must be carefully monitored.

Farm personnel did not let him bring air-monitoring equipment — or even paper and a pen — into the facility, according to the agency’s report. The document does not say what Pisasale intended to measure, but some emissions from livestock manure at high concentrations can sicken or even kill people. Air monitoring could have indicated, or ruled out, poisoning from these emissions.

The next day, Pisasale interviewed farm employees, who told him about other areas where Zach had applied spray foam during his final hours.

When Pisasale returned to the farm on April 4, Sarah Pillen and Mark Fahleson, a lawyer, initially denied him entry, according to the OSHA report. They said that the agency was “fishing for violations” and that Pisasale could endanger the pigs by bringing in pathogens, the report added.

After some back and forth, he was allowed to walk through the farm without monitoring equipment.

“We simply requested that OSHA follow our established biosecurity protocols,” Sarah Pillen wrote in an email to The Times, noting that all outside materials required “disinfection and downtime” before entering farms. (She did not provide answers to a written list of other questions sent by The Times.)

Robert Triplett, a former assistant area director in OSHA’s office in Savannah, Georgia, said that he obtained court orders when faced with pushback from other workplaces. He was among a half-dozen former OSHA officials interviewed for this article who expressed surprise at the Omaha office’s acquiescence to the restrictions.

On April 5, Matthew Thurlby, the Omaha area director, emailed a colleague about the case: “It is important to note that Pillen Family Farms is affiliated with Governor Jim Pillen of Nebraska,” he wrote. “This is the family business.”

The governor maintains a stake in the company, which is among the [top 15 pork producers in the nation](#). Two of the governor’s children, Sarah and a son Brock, oversee day-to-day operations.

OSHA did not respond to a query about why the director mentioned the governor. Douglas Parker, who led the agency until early 2025, said it was not unusual for OSHA officials to flag political sensitivities in cases likely to draw media attention.

A representative for the governor said neither Pillen nor anyone in his office had spoken to OSHA or local officials about the investigations.

Linde said she was puzzled by what she found during Zach’s autopsy, including congestion in multiple organs and an enlarged spleen.

One finding jumped out: Zach’s lungs weighed 4.5 pounds, almost twice as much as those of a healthy adult his size. She observed no indications of an asthma attack; Zach had asthma when he was younger, but had no problems in recent years.

Over the next few weeks, Linde spotted a mast cell in his lungs, then found many more — signs she would eventually attribute to an immune response to an allergen that had set off dangerous inflammation, she said in an interview.

Early on, Linde was informed by the sheriff that the teenager had used spray foam, but she was not aware that a chemical in the foam and other products was known to have caused severe [illnesses](#) and even [deaths](#).

Toxicology tests found low levels of THC from cannabis use and therapeutic amounts of amphetamine consistent with Zach's prescribed ADHD medication. The results also indicated exposure to hydrogen sulfide from manure gas, but not at high levels.

Pisasale would finally be able to test the air quality at the farm in August, finding low levels of gas emissions from manure. He noted in his report that the conditions were similar to the April day that Zach died, but Pillen employees and industrial hygienists disagreed, saying in interviews that the farm would have had better ventilation in summer.

There is no reliable test for measuring concentrations of spray foam chemicals in the air after application, as they dissipate quickly.

Making little progress in Zach's case, Linde contacted OSHA in May. She spoke with Pisasale the next month and was told that on the day he died, Zach had applied "small amounts of spray foam insulation," according to the autopsy report. But Pisasale didn't offer any information about Zach's possible previous foam exposures.

"That's a huge missing piece," Linde said. She also had not seen OSHA's photographs of the farm until recently; they showed more extensive foam application than she had expected.

Sticky orange foam

Zach was described by his family and friends as very smart, but not so motivated in school. "He had such a bright future," said Anne Martinez, a teacher. He was thinking of studying computer science in college, said his brother, Riley Riggs.

In high school, Zach clashed with his mother over his marijuana use and was eventually sent to a rehabilitation program in Omaha, where he earned enough credits to graduate. After returning home, he was hired at Beaver Valley Pork as a part-time maintenance trainee in February 2024.

His job included sealing up cracks. One day, after picking up Zach after his shift, Riggs-Panther noticed her son picking off pieces of orange foam from his arms. That occurred on at least three different days, she said.

She recalled Zach joking that the farm was held together by duct tape and spray foam. Michael Blankenship, a friend of Zach's, remembered him talking about monotonously filling gaps and adding that Zach mentioned spraying foam at work a few days before he died.

Hog barns contract and expand with temperature changes, creating cracks that need to be sealed, often with polyurethane foam, so that airborne diseases cannot enter from outside.

The orange foam was from Great Stuff, manufactured by DuPont and sold at stores like Home Depot. It contains a hazardous chemical compound called isocyanate.

Many people have used the foam for home improvement projects with no ill effects. But after exposures to isocyanate via inhalation or skin contact, some people can become sensitized to it; in such cases, even tiny amounts can trigger severe asthma, skin burning or inflammation. The manufacturer's [safety sheet](#) instructs users to handle the product only with sufficient ventilation or while wearing a respirator.

The day before Zach died, his brother recalled, he lifted 225 pounds at the high school gym. That night, while playing a video game, Blankenship said that Zach had a deep cough, which had begun a few days earlier.

During his final shift, Zach applied spray foam for one to two hours without a respirator, according to OSHA documents. The OSHA report said it was the second time Zach had used Great Stuff, which is at odds with Riggs-Panther's recollections.

Dr. Dawn Cannon, an OSHA physician in Washington who consulted on the case, was familiar with isocyanates; she was the first to ask whether Zach's death was linked to foam. Along with a retired OSHA medical expert, Cannon believed that it was "likely" that exposure to foam caused a reaction that led to Zach's death, she told Linde in an email in September 2024.

Eight experts — toxicologists, pulmonologists and other specialists — who independently reviewed the OSHA and autopsy reports also said the most likely explanation for Zach's death was a reaction to the foam.

Dr. Steven Pike, an occupational medicine physician and toxicologist in New Mexico, said he believed that Zach probably had become sensitized to the foam. He suggested that additional exposure set off "a runaway immune reaction" in the teen's body, but cautioned that he could not be certain.

Seven additional experts raised other possibilities, including a cardiac cause, but most said they couldn't reach a conclusion.

In September 2024, Cannon recommended a lung tissue test and a blood test that together could help determine if an immune response to the foam had led to Zach's death. But as Linde's lab prepared to ship the blood sample, a technician accidentally destroyed it.

It was the last suitable blood sample — and chance for the test — they had left.

Unanswered questions, but a case closed

Kyle Litz, who oversaw Beaver Valley Pork, told Pisasale in an interview that members of the maintenance staff had also used Froth-Pak, an industrial-grade foam, about a month before Zach died. "We usually blitz that pretty good about once a year," he said in the interview, a recording of which was obtained through a public records request.

Froth-Pak also contains isocyanate, and its manufacturer, DuPont, provided guidance in its safety [training](#) and manual: People applying the foam and anyone nearby must wear a respirator and protective clothing.

The OSHA report did not say whether Zach could have been exposed to Froth-Pak. Beaver Valley Pork did not make respirators mandatory while applying any spray foam, Litz told Pisasale. In interviews with The Times, a manager and a former employee at two nearby Pillen farms also said they didn't use respirators when spraying foam.

"DuPont expects our publicly available safety guidance to be followed," Dan Turner, a representative for DuPont, wrote in a statement. "Our products are routinely handled safely under these guidelines."

OSHA closed the case in September, meeting an agency deadline. The agency's report concluded that an allergic reaction to spray foam was "unlikely" to have caused Zach's death, given his "limited" usage of the foam.

Because the cause of death was undetermined, OSHA considered the farm in compliance with agency rules, Thurlby, the Omaha office director, wrote to a supervisor. The farm was not required to change how it handles spray foams.

Few OSHA standards involving respiratory protections [apply to agricultural businesses](#). Still, some former agency officials said that Beaver Valley Pork must follow a broad rule to keep workplaces "free from recognized hazards" that are likely to cause death or serious harm.

Keith Demerest, a former OSHA industrial hygienist in Ohio, said an employer could not ignore the manufacturer's guidance on respirators unless they proved workers were not at risk.

Citations for such violations are rare. "Because of difficulty in obtaining samples that reflect working conditions, chemical exposures are very much under-enforced by OSHA," said Parker, the former agency chief.

Riggs-Panther is haunted by what-ifs. What if her son had better respiratory protection? What if there had been a buddy system in place? What if there had been stricter rules that workplaces, regardless of whether a farm or factory floor, needed to follow?

"The idea that maybe it could have been preventable is really intolerable," she said. "But how do you know what to do to keep it from happening again when you don't know what happened in the first place?"

Julie Tate, Kirsten Noyes, Alain Delaqu erie and Kitty Bennett contributed research to this article.

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Hail Mary, by Steve Kemper

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