Rylee Gustafson – Henderson, NV  
Date, age when sickened: August 2006, 9

Rylee Gustafson, a caring and happy-go-lucky child, loved to sing and dance, and was quick to make new friends. For her 9th birthday, Rylee’s mother, Kathleen Chrismer, planned a trip from their hometown of Henderson, NV to San Francisco and Monterey, CA, where Rylee couldn’t wait to visit the aquarium. They had no idea that Rylee would not be able to return home for over a month, all because she ate a spinach salad contaminated with E. coli O157:H7.

The morning after they arrived in Monterey, Rylee woke up complaining of a severe stomach ache and diarrhea. What should have been a fun trip to the aquarium quickly turned into a terrifying rush to the hospital. After noticing blood in Rylee’s stool during a bathroom stop, Kathleen pulled into the nearest urgent care facility. In terrible pain and growing sicker by the minute, Rylee was transferred to two more hospitals before arriving at UCSF Children’s Hospital, where she was immediately admitted to the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit. Rylee’s condition continued to worsen; her blood pressure dropped and she was dehydrated and hallucinating. Her kidneys began to fail, and she was put on dialysis. “Nothing could be done to make it less painful,” says Kathleen. “We sat there for 30 days, not knowing whether she’d pull through.”

Rylee eventually recovered after spending a full month in the hospital and an additional two months at home, away from school and dance lessons. As the result of a difficult intubation procedure, Rylee also lost her voice, a condition for which she underwent speech therapy. Unfortunately, the damage to Rylee’s kidneys can never be reversed. Though now in good health, emotional scars remain, including a fear of eating raw vegetables and fruits.

Kathleen still finds it difficult to comprehend that it was contaminated spinach that caused Rylee’s illness. “We drove through the area where the spinach came from – ‘America’s Salad Bowl’ – on our way to Monterey, and I felt shocked and angry as I wonder how this made Rylee so sick,” says Kathleen. “As consumers, we don’t have the power to check on these products. Without a better system to protect us, we are totally at the mercy of the next outbreak.”