

Interview with Aroha Harawira

Interview by Lewis Whaitiri

How would you describe your smoking status?

I would describe my smoking status as non-smoker but I am an ex smoker. A long time ago.

Do you think smoking is as common now as it used to be?

Definitely not in Aotearoa. I would say that a campaign such as this one has made a bit of a difference and I can see it from personal experience, you know a lot of my cousins and stuff they have spoken to me about it and said that it does make them think twice. I think smoking being taken out of bars has had a big impact.

So do you think it's socially acceptable to take up smoking now?

I would say not so much now, like you do actually have to go out of your way to have a cigarette and remove yourself from your group of friends to do it.

What about around your whanau for instance?

Around my whanau, like my parents would be really disappointed if they saw me smoking yet my mother is a smoker and I think that is the reason why because she knows how hard it is to quit and she wants to quit and my grandmother actually passed away from smoking. It's one of those things where it's not acceptable but they still do it.

Why do you think some young Maori still take up smoking?

It's kind of hard, like when I was growing up I always watched my grandmother and my mother and all of the other females in my whanau smoke and I was always very anti it and it wasn't until I left home and I was away from my mother that I realised well I didn't realise anything actually I just started smoking at that stage. I think I actually really missed the smell. I was so used to it, it was in my life every day, I had no choice but to be surrounded by smoke because my mum smoked inside. And part of me thinks that maybe that was like my security blanket, like connecting myself with my mother again, which is really sad when you think about it.

How did you learn to cope with not smoking?

I cope with it now because I watched my Nanny die. She was in my arms and she died from emphysema and I knew at that moment there would just be no way that I would ever encourage or want any of my whanau to go through that and I would do everything that I could to try and help them all to stop.

So that was quite an empowering moment for you to see?

It was sad though that it took me that long to realise.

Is it cool to refuse a cigarette?

I think it's cool to refuse a cigarette because you're taking the power into your own hands. You're saying what is the truth, you're just being yourself.

What do you think smoking says about a person?

I think smoking says, well there are a number of factors, but insecurity definitely comes into it and I can even use an example from about three years ago where all of my friends at the bar, we'd go out for a few drinks whatever and be having a good time and a big chunk of my friends would all be like, 'Let's go out and have a ciggie' and I don't want to be stuck with none of my mates around so I would go out there and they would all be smoking and I would just kind of be like hands in my pockets or not sure what to do so they would offer me a cigarette and like, 'Hey, why not?' I never enjoyed it. I don't know why I did it. It's kind of an insecurity thing I think.

What happens when you go out with a group of friends now and they are all smoking?

You know what? Most of my friends have given up smoking and that is something which has sort of happened in the past three years. Maybe it's my age now, I'm not sure but I just don't think that as many people want to smoke or take it up in the first place. It's much nicer being inside where it's warm and if you're at a bar you can just sit at the bar and have a drink, you don't have to go and stand out freezing in the cold. I think more and more people are realising that it's not cool. There is nothing cool about it, you're not impressing anyone.

So you had a few friends who had been smoking for a while then?

Yeah and a few of my friends managed to give up smoking after having smoked since they were like 13 or 14 so I think that's really awesome. It makes me really proud and I think it's important for people to tell their mates that they are proud of them. Even if they start smoking again because it's real hard, but tell them 'good on you', 'good on you for giving it a shot at least.'

So support is a big thing then for people quitting smoking?

Support is a definite big thing. I think so often smokers when they try to give up, they'll beat themselves up when they have another cigarette and they will be like, 'Well I gave up giving up so I might as well just start smoking again.' But if they've got good mates around them it's just like, 'Look it's okay, it doesn't matter if you stuffed up. So what? Give it another go, it's not the end of the world, you can keep trying.'

What do you think is the worst thing about smoking?

I think the worst thing about smoking is that it kills people. It's really sad that you could be my best mate and the next thing you're gone. It might be years down the track but you know so many people say 'I like smoking', but what is there to like about it really?

As a TV presenter, what are your thoughts on smoking and how it affects your performance?

I have never been a smoker since I've been presenting on television. I was definitely smoking when I first started out in radio and I think that changed the way my voice sounded, which at the time I thought was kind of cool but that's not who I am you know? That's not what I sound like. I sound like this, this is my voice and I'm proud of it.

Do you think smoking would affect your reputation and have an influence on younger people?

Definitely yeah. Definitely on younger people. Like, for whatever reason, if I decided to take up smoking again, which I never will, I would be pretty ashamed if you know any rangatahi saw me smoking. I would want to hide it, definitely. I don't think it's socially acceptable. I think it just looks kind of stink you know? And if I see someone that I have looked up to for a long time or I know that other younger people look up to having a cigarette it kind of bums me out.

Would you go out with a smoker if you were single?

Would I go out with a smoker if I was single? That's a hard question because I don't think that being a smoker makes you a bad person but I would find it pretty hard to kiss them.

How come?

It's the smell. I mean, kissing a smoker is pretty foul when you are not a smoker. When you are a smoker it's just like breathing the same air that they are breathing, it's no different. But when you've got someone around you, like I've got a couple of mates that still smoke, and I feel real bad, it's kind of like when someone's got BO and you don't want to tell them that they stink because you love them and they're your mates but if they come too close to you you're just like, 'oh, it's pretty yucky.'

Do you think you could tell a smoker from a non-smoker?

I think you can tell a smoker from a non-smoker. I mean even when I am watching television and there is someone who has that particular smoker's voice you can hear it you know? The lines around the mouth, yeah I can pick a smoker on TV. I think it's one of those things that is actually quite obvious but not so much to the people who are doing it.

What ways do you think you could support a friend who was trying to quit smoking?

I think the main thing is just to encourage them; don't berate them, don't say anything that is negative. Use positive reinforcements. I think another thing to remind your friend or whanau of is that if they can give up smoking then they can do anything in their life. For so long I have hassled my mum about smoking and I want her to give up and I just don't think that telling someone they are going to die is going to help them in any way. Just be really positive and encourage people to give up smoking. That can help them make other changes in their life. If they can jump that hurdle then if there are other things in their lives that they are not happy with then they can use that as an example of what they can do and maybe they can do other awesome things.

I really like that idea. So since quitting smoking, what have been some positive changes that have happened in your life?

I'm on TV, I'm on the radio, I feel like I'm pretty successful and I think that giving up smoking is definitely one of those things that has helped me achieve my dreams. I think if I was a smoker maybe I wouldn't have as much confidence in myself.

Do you think using services like Quitline is a good thing or does it show a sign of weakness?

Definitely not. I think you have to ask for help. If you want to give up smoking, ask for help, there is no shame in that. Don't be whakama, just do it, reach out.

What would you say to rangatahi who are thinking of taking up smoking or who are starting to smoke at a young age?

Just take a step back and ask yourself why you are doing it. Are you doing it to show off? Are you doing it to make yourself look more adult? Are you doing it to lose money? There are so many negative aspects to smoking, I just don't understand why people would want to take it up you know? Is it because a film star on TV is doing it? I mean they are just acting, it's not cool.

So do you think external factors (like seeing smoking in films) impacts young people's perceptions of smoking?

Yeah, I think probably more so in my case it would be to do with family environments you know? You watch your parents, you watch your parents' friends, you watch your cousins, your aunties and uncles all having a ciggie, drinking some beers, that kind of thing, so we imitate them. And it is now more than ever that smoking isn't actually a good thing at all. It's just like drinking and driving, that's not cool. You don't get into a car and try and kill your mate so why would you offer your mate a cigarette and tell them to start smoking, it's the same scenario.

You mentioned money before. What is your take on the financial aspect of smoking?

It's a personal thing for me because I grew up poor and I saw my mum spend so much money on cigarettes and I was always fed but she would you know almost starve herself so that she could have her cigarettes, make sure I was fed and have her cigarettes and at the end of the day it used to drive me nuts. Why could you not just stop smoking 20 cigarettes a day? It's not that easy but why could you not just stop smoking 20 cigarettes a day and have a bit more money so we could have a bit more food?

What's your take on smokefree marae?

My take on that is I think that it's really awesome and my marae in the Wairarapa is actually smokefree. My grandmother's tangi was the first ever tangi held at our marae and our request was that the marae would be smokefree and I think that more marae could do the same. I think it's a really positive step towards trying to help Maori people not be a statistic anymore.

And the same with bars and stuff being smokefree?

Yeah, definitely. I think when I was living in Melbourne I was working in bars and restaurants and they changed their law around that time and the change was amazing. Before the change, I would go home after a night of work and just be like, 'Oh my eyes', and just feel terrible and always had these really bad headaches and then as soon as the law changed and people weren't allowed to smoke in bars anymore it was like my eyes had been opened. I didn't realise how significant the amount of cigarette smoke actually was and how it influenced my health.

What is your view on the tobacco industry?

My view on the tobacco industry is that they are on the way out. Their time is up. I think more and more it's going to be less and less socially acceptable and they are going to have to think of other ways to make money and I hope that it's not going to kill people in the process because that is what they have been doing for way too long.

Do you crave smoking anymore?

Definitely not.

What are the benefits you get from being smokefree?

I smell good. I can taste food better. I have had more opportunities open up to me.

Any advice for people in general that are trying to give up smoking?

Just don't give up on yourself, have faith in yourself. If you stumble, it's not the end of the world, you can keep doing it, you've got a lot of time but don't leave it too late.