

Interview with Chris Sisarich

Interview by Dave Gibson

How do you describe your smoking status right now? Are you a smoker, ex-smoker, never smoked, where are you at?

Yeah I was the social smoker, the one that used to nick everyone's cigarettes off them because I was too cheap to buy my own but now I don't really smoke. I probably every now and again would have a cigarette if I was out drinking so maybe once or twice a year and then it's usually only a couple of drags then, 'Nah it doesn't taste that good at all.' In the last, I don't know maybe 10 years, I would have smoked about 10 cigarettes.

So what stops you smoking regularly?

It's really easy, I mean most of the time for me, I think it's kind of pretty revolting and I'm more into feeling healthy, having healthy skin, having lots of energy. I want to make sure that my body is feeling in tune and fit and healthy and smoking just makes me feel shitty, like I wake up the next day and I feel grotty like an ashtray.

So you find there are lots of reasons to be smokefree?

For me yeah, I surf, snowboard, I'm outside a lot, I've got kids, I kind of like to be active and I like to feel healthy and strong and I just know that smoking is not going to make me feel like that you know? If I'm surfing or running it's going to affect how hard I can surf or the size of the waves that I can surf or how many times I can run around the park with my kids, you know what I mean?

Yeah.

I mean, the whole thing of smoking reducing the lungs' ability to create oxygen which in turn makes energy, on the outside of that it's running around the park, it's surfing, it's running up a sand dune or running down a beach or swimming out to an island in summer and back, it's all those kind of things that it's going to hinder, that's why I don't smoke. I wouldn't be able to live the life I live if I was a smoker.

Do you think smoking is as common now as it used to be a few years ago?

I don't think it's as common now. I think people are way more aware of how anti-social it is and how bad it is for you. It's ridiculously expensive you know, you buy cigarettes and all you're doing is killing yourself. I think people are a lot more into getting more out of their lives and we realise that smoking is not helping so yeah, definite decline. My dad for example smoked 60 cigarettes a day and that generation of people, they all smoked, it was just kind of the thing to do, so yeah I think we're a lot more savvy now.

How old were you when you had your first cigarette?

Probably twelve.

And was that one of dad's?

No it was one of my big brother's. I would have snuck into his bedroom or a fort or something and found a packet of cigarettes and we would have run off into the bush and smoked it.

Does your dad still smoke?

No he gave up.

How long ago?

It would be about 25 years ago but I remember things like being on a plane and having to sit in the smoking section of the plane so dad could have his cigarettes and we're a family of five kids. That kind of thing really sticks with you.

It's funny aye, I can't imagine smoking on planes now...

It was really interesting, I've just been up in Indonesia and everybody up there smokes. They have the biggest ad campaigns all round the place, smoking campaigns, and it's so noticeable.

You mean pro-smoking campaigns?

Yeah pro-smoking. Like loads of stuff, quite funny stuff too. Like there was a picture of a speedo and it was 160 miles an hour and something about, 'Go fast. Smoke Black Diamond', you know this kind of thing.

Doesn't that make you think about how lucky we are in New Zealand that we just don't accept tobacco industry advertising?

Yeah. Actually another example is I was up in Spain recently and I went out to a bar, walked in, you can still smoke in bars over there, and it was kind of like this small little club with a low roof and everyone's smoking. I just couldn't stay there. I had to leave, it was just so full on, then coming home to New Zealand and being able to go out for a drink and not be invaded by someone else's cigarette smoking, that's great. That's when you really notice it I reckon, coming back from overseas places like Indo or Spain or wherever else they smoke, then you come here and you can eat in a restaurant or you can go to a bar and have a drink and not come out stinking or feeling like you've had a cigarette. Because it's all about choice you know? I don't judge people that smoke but I don't want to go out and have a glass of wine and feel like I've been smoking as well if I'm deciding not to smoke.

Do you think it's as socially acceptable to smoke now as it used to be?

Definitely not. I was thinking about it, like I said before I don't judge people that smoke and it's their choice but if one of my good buddies was a big smoker I'd be putting the pressure on him to stop because of what he's missing out on as far as life goes.

Why do you think some young people are still taking up smoking?

It's that whole thing about rebelling against everything we've been told not to do. It's just in our nature to do what we're told not to do so smoking cigarettes is one of those things. You can tell a young kid, 'Don't go fast it's going to kill you' but you're going to go fast because you want to walk on that fine line. You want to push the envelope the whole time to see how far you can push it.

What would you say to a young person who has started smoking socially?

I would talk to them about getting the most out of life, you know? I think for me probably the stuff that has the most relevance is something like surfing, like if a kid was starting to surf and he was smoking it would be easy to say, 'Hey man, look if you want to be good at surfing and if you really want to enjoy your surfing then smoking is going to make that really difficult for you'. The only way to do it is to show them rather than tell them.

You can lead the horse?

Yeah, it's like you've got to show people the way rather than tell them because you can talk till you're blue in the face and it doesn't really matter but you've got to show people by example. Sort of try and say a couple of things then lead by example more.

As a photographer do you have any thoughts on smoking and how it affects your work?

I think the only thing is that you'd smell and you've got to get into people's personal space a lot so that could be invasive and maybe a bit offensive.

In what ways can someone support a friend or family member who is trying to quit?

I reckon the best thing to do would be encouraging them to get into things like exercising and doing whatever it is they get off on, whether it's the gym, or swimming, or riding a bike or surfing, or skating or whatever. I think if you encourage them, and get them into that, 'Come on, we're going surfing or for a run or to the gym' they'd realise pretty quickly the effect that smoking is having on their body and how it's hindering their performance and I think you probably wouldn't really have to say a lot because they'd just know and feel that their performance is lagging because of the fact they smoke.

I think that would be pretty encouraging and I think once you start to exercise and get into sport, those endorphins start to kick in and you want to get fitter, or you want to get faster, or you want to surf bigger waves, or skate down bigger hills, or swim a longer distance you know what I mean? You want to tune your body to get better at it and the only way to do that

is to eat right, don't smoke. You want to make your body a temple, that's personally what I'd do.

Would you consider quitting smoking a real achievement?

Yeah for sure, because it's such an addictive drug, it's physically addictive and obviously it's chemically addictive. So the physical aspects of having to give up, of having to break an addiction, you know it takes a lot of hard work and mental willpower so that's a huge achievement.

Do you think using help like Quitline and nicotine products like patches and gum is a legitimate way to quit smoking?

Totally legitimate. It's a sign of strength. That's the first step that they've made a decision to stop so that's great. I'm a big believer that you've got to get people around you to help you stop whatever it is you've got an issue with.

Do you have any advice for people trying to quit?

My advice would be to use any tool that you can to help you stop smoking. The other thing I'd do too if I was talking to someone, I'd be encouraging them to get into some sort of sport because I think that kind of thing, getting the oxygen around the body gives you a brighter mind. It gives you more energy and that for sure can help.

Do you have any thoughts on the tobacco industry?

Yeah, it's the smoking industry and you really see it in places like Indonesia, which is a third world country and the amount of people smoking is huge so it's like this big evil...they manipulate and take advantage of people to make billions of dollars through greed. The tobacco industry is one of the biggest industries in the world and what do they sell you? A product that kills you. What's the point?

What prompted you to stop smoking socially?

It was a waste of time really and I just kind of got to a point where it's like, 'I don't want to. I want to be fit and healthy' and you know smoking just seemed like a waste of time.