

Interview with Claire Chitham

Interview by Dave Gibson

How would you currently describe your smoking status?

I am a proud ex-smoker. I quit when I was 24, started smoking when I was about 16. Working in television everybody else did it and gradually it was you know, social smoker with your friends drinking on a Friday night and then yeah I started working in television and it got more and more cause everybody around me smoked and when I got to the age of 21-22 I started caring a lot more about my health. I always knew smoking was bad, you always know smoking is bad for you but don't necessarily know what to do about it and you don't care enough to stop.

You're invincible when you are 16...

Absolutely and immortal and I had some serious health problems going on you know sort of 21-22 and I started to care about them a lot more and more and I fixed them and I knew that smoking was always going to be a big part of that so that's when I started thinking about quitting and it was probably a couple of years but I did it on my own.

Congratulations.

Thanks.

There was a lot of smoking in television production. Has it changed?

Yes, it definitely has, a massive noticeable difference. When I was working on Shortland Street when I was 16 you could smoke in the entire building except for the makeup room and the studios, so I would go in to my dressing room and be changing in between scenes, which is about a one minute window and light a ciggy, change into my costume, stogie it and run back in. It just seems so foreign and disgusting to me now. And gradually they stopped smoking in most of the building then there was only one room you could smoke in, like the green room and everybody was up in arms but you know all of the smokers go with the flow and go and smoke in the green room and it all turns out ok and then we shifted buildings to West Auckland and that's when we knew that the whole building was going to be non-smoking and it was so terrifying to us and it was just, you would turn up and it's like, 'Oh now you go and smoke outside'. It's not like it affects your life in any way shape or form.

I was a non-smoker when the non-smoking in bars kicked in and I could not believe the difference in smell and you know stink in your hair and your mouth and the smell on other people and that sort of thing and it just, the idea of smoking inside now is literally poisoning other people so why would you do it? It's unbelievable.

I worked out when I gave up smoking that for me smoking was something to do, something to do with my hands, it was literally a time filler and I guess because it's frowned upon so much more now and people look down at you. I look down at other people about it now.

What do you think did it? What's been the major factors in moving people away from smoking cause it's the same in the music industry, you know four years ago every single band I knew, all of us smoked, we all smoked and now it's rare, it's actually rare, you know.

Yeah. I think it's got to do with awareness, obviously education, we all know exactly what it does to us now and we sort of knew but we just didn't care. I think it's a young thing. I think when you start to get older as you said you care about your health and you start to care about your mortality. You realise you are not invincible and health becomes a positive thing as opposed to 'who cares' and I think it's cooler to care about yourself now. Smoking was a big peer pressure thing, you smoke because your friends do and as you say less and less people are doing it now and as you get older yeah I think it's awareness and education. I remember that even when I was a smoker, even though I knew it was bad for me it wasn't until about three months after I had given up that I truly realised how pointless it is. Smoking doesn't give you anything, all it does is take, it takes your health, it takes your money, it takes your life, it takes your energy. It takes your looks, it takes the quality of your skin, it takes.

Was it empowering to quit?

Quitting smoking was singularly the most empowering thing I have ever done for myself cause it's totally personal journey. You are the only one that is in control of it and you're the only one that can do anything about it. You're the only one that is going to benefit from it and so you have to do it for yourself and for nobody else. You can get people to help you, I was lucky enough to have friends who had already quit and I absolutely used that device. I remember twice I rang a friend just going. 'I just want to have one to try it, I would really like to be a social smoker' and ringing my friend and him going. 'Just don't. I know you do right now but just don't' and then he talked to me for a while, distracted me and by the time we finished the conversation I was over it. The moment passes you know, and that first cigarette is never going to be or taste like the cigarette that you think it's going to.

You know I used to think that I loved the feeling of smoking and how it made me feel and I realised you get exactly the same feeling from inhaling a lung full of oxygen and obviously one of those things is much better for you and yeah it's like a stupid trick, it's like the stupidest trick in the book that somebody is pulling on you that smoking does anything good for you. You think it makes you feel better or you think it gives you stress relief in a moment.

I used to think that inhaling a cigarette made me feel relaxed or gave me stress relief and I remember about three months after I quit I sat down one day and just taking a massive deep breath and I got just as much relief and relaxation from that lung full of oxygen as I did from what I used to think smoking gave me.

Breathing is good.

It's like a lung full of oxygen gives you more stress relief and gives you more than inhaling a cigarette does. Yeah it sounds stupid but it's true.

How important was it to have a support network around you when you were quitting?

I had two good friends, one at work and one just a social friend who had quit who knew that I was trying to and that was really important, A) just for the phone call aspect but B) I think in a social situation at work it was really good to have somebody else, we always used to go and have a cigarette together and now we were not smoking together and that was really vital to have.

Did you have any negative experiences of when you tried to quit, like did anybody hinder your attempt to quit? I know that I hated people you know laughing at me when I said I was going to quit, saying, 'Oh you will never quit Dave, you smoke heaps, you are never going to quit.' Do have any advice to people of how they can support others to quit?

What I did was I did it gradually when I quit. I set myself little deals, smoking in the car used to be my sort of main place that I had a cigarette and so I gave up smoking in the car first but I let myself smoke in other places because when you are quitting you feel like you are taking something away from yourself and you don't want to deny yourself anything so I made little deals where I said, 'I am not going to smoke here but I can smoke over here' in situations that worked best for me and that's how I gradually cut down until I got to the point where I was only smoking one or two cigarettes a day, maybe a bit more on the weekend. So then I cut down more, I cut out all my cigarettes during the week and it was only sort of a social thing and then I woke up one Monday morning, my voice was affected from a big weekend of heavy smoking and obviously as an actor that's my number one tool and I thought, 'That's it' and I stopped for my first 24 hours and my first 24 hours was the first 24 hours I had ever gone without having a cigarette in six years. But I had got to that point gradually so that when I got through the first week I was like, 'That's my first week done, I don't want to go back, there is no need to go back'. I didn't talk about it too much to other people because I didn't want them to be able to say, 'No don't do it' or 'Yay, good on you'. I knew that I had to go down that path by myself.

What advice would you offer others trying to quit?

I think when you make the decision that you want to quit you have got your own reasons as to why and only you can truly know that so that's what you have to hold on to. It's your journey so you're the only one that can keep you on the path and you are the only one that is going to benefit in the long run and you have to hold on to that hope. You hold on to it cause it's true because you know you can get through. I got through one week and I felt so proud of myself, that was the only thing in my head for the whole weekend was, 'I made it through a week, good on me' and then you make it through a month and again, you have these

moments of pride and of course you are getting the financial benefits and you go and buy yourself a treat to make it okay.

That 10 bucks is still in my wallet....

Yeah that 10 bucks, and now it's like \$20. When I gave up it was about \$7 a packet and I can't believe the cost of them now and that people, I mean that's possibly another reason why people are doing it less. I just started to feel so much better, my body was processing food better, my skin was looking better, my taste and hair and all that sort of thing, I couldn't believe how much the smell infected my clothes and that I didn't notice it when I was a smoker, cause if you go out to a bar for a drink with some mates for like one hour and you come home put those clothes back in the drawer cause I think I have only been out for an hour, whatever, and when I gave up smoking I remember being out for one hour and going home that night and just reeking of it and going, 'What was I thinking?' Unbelievable.

Tell us about that moment when you realised oh I can actually quit? Did you have one moment, one point?

Yeah I had a lot of them. I think as an actor I am really interested in human beings and why we do what we do and I was always perturbed by the fact that I had become a smoker because I never thought I was that sort of person, whatever "that" is. I am really interested in the human condition and what goes on in our heads and giving up smoking was such a quiet and personal journey that I was really interested in the conversations that I had with myself, you know, 'Do you want one now? No it's ok'. You literally have little conversations with yourself.

How important is what's going on in your head?

Hugely important. You have to be brave. It's ok to be brave because you have to think, 'these conversations are good and these conversations that I am having with myself are necessary and ok, I am not going insane', you know, and they are interesting. You have conversations while you are quitting and then you have conversations two years later when you see your friends smoke and you go, 'God damn it I wish they didn't but I am going to shut my mouth cause I don't want to be one of those sanctimonious people' but now I take joy in being sanctimonious about it because I care enough about my friends to want to make them stop and so I am the girl that sits there and goes, 'Oh gross, how does that make you feel? Are you feeling awesome? Ace but you're not you know'. So yeah those conversations are really important and you have them constantly, you keep having them.

As an actor, what advantages or changes have you noticed since quitting?

Once I gave up I went back to singing training because I needed to repair the damage I had done to my vocal chords from smoking. Once I had quit, the amount of lung capacity I had increased, the amount of energy, my stamina increased, physically it's easier for me to get match fit when I need to do theatre particularly because you need so much energy and

physical presence on the stage and obviously you need to be able to support your diaphragm to project to use your voice, all of that kind of thing. You have to have a good support network physically and the difference before and after is so massive. I will never let myself work from a less than optimal place again, particularly on stage.

Do you think that smoking affected your public image?

Coming from working on Shortland Street and obviously then on to Outrageous Fortune, you end up being in the position of being seen to be a role model or being in the public arena and I am so prouder to be a non-smoker. We used to hide the fact that we were smokers. I have never, I would never publicly speak about being a smoker until I was a non-smoker because I don't want to be setting a bad example to others and I think it is a bad example to set. It is something that I regret that I did and it's absolutely something that you don't want to be passing on to other people.

So what would you say to young people who have started smoking?

I guess I would ask them why they are doing it. I know that at the time you don't want to admit that you are doing it because other people were doing it but sometimes it is. I don't know, it's hard with young people cause you can't force somebody to do something that they don't want to do. All I can do is tell people how much better I feel from not doing it and the fact that I wish I had never done it. My biggest regret is that my younger brother smokes now and he is a year away from being the same age I was when I quit and we made the deal that I wasn't allowed to give him crap about smoking until he turned 24 and he is a year away and I keep giving him shit about it. I am not going to stop giving him shit about it because I hate that he smokes. I see him, I see the quality of his skin but I also, I hear him with a bronchial cough constantly, that never leaves, you don't ever shake it and you think that it's just the weather or the winter or you're picking up bugs, it's like, 'No dude, you are coughing because you're a smoker and you have no immune system, your immune system is shot to hell and you can't fight the bugs that you get cause your body doesn't let you cause you are constantly poisoning it.'

Do you know anyone who used Quitline and had any success with that or did you use it?

I didn't use Quitline. I am a bit of a stubborn bitch and I like to do things for myself and so part of giving up smoking for me was I want to do this on my own. I don't like people telling me what to do.

Did you use patches at all?

No I didn't. What I did use was a friend to ring and say, 'I sort of feel like having a cigarette' and him going, 'Just don't, there's no need, you can get over it, you don't need that.' Yeah, just knowing someone and by a friend I mean a good friend, someone you respect that you can ring and go, 'Dude I really feel like one' and they can go, 'Yeah but you don't need it so

don't' and you hang up and go, 'Ok I don't, just get through the next 10 minutes and you don't need it.'

So he was like your personal Quitline?

Yeah I think I only rang him twice.

But twice was enough?

Yeah and what I did use when I was giving up smoking in the car which was the most regular place that I used to smoke, was a bag of pretzels and so I would only ever have like one of them cause it takes ages to chew those things but I would have one and that would like be my substitute thing in my hand instead of a cigarette.

Would you encourage other people to use a pretzel?

Yes, yeah it's more fun than a carrot stick.

Pretty healthy treat too aye?

Paul Newman's own organic pretzels, they are long and they look like a cigarette.

What do you think about the smokefree laws?

I have watched people go outside in storms and freezing temperatures to have a poisonous cigarette that lowers your body temperature even further. It's ridiculous, like look at yourself what are you doing? The good thing about the fact that you can only smoke outside means you have to consciously make a decision to go outside and have a cigarette and so many of the cigarettes I used to smoke were unconscious and when I started quitting I made a decision that I was, it sounds stupid and it is, but I was only going to have the cigarettes that I really wanted as opposed to all of the stupid unnecessary ones in between, and that cut down about half just to start off with.

What ones were those more unconscious ones?

Like going to chat with your friends outside. I mean that was when you could still smoke inside so it was sitting with a friend if they were having one then you naturally had one, even though you didn't necessarily want one, it's that whole you're having it because they are.

Yeah, it's all chain lighting up aye?

Yeah, the first weekend that I went out after quitting I was with friends in a bar sitting down and having great conversations and then there is a lull in the conversation and that's when somebody else reaches for a ciggy and I went, 'That's the point that I am going to walk away now so I am going to go off to the dance floor' so I'd go to the dance floor and I would be on the dance floor for 10 minutes dancing with some friends and then one of them makes a

decision to go off and have a ciggy and I go that's the point that I am going to go off and go back to talk to somebody else sitting at the bar, and I ran around like a headless chicken for a little while but I was like, 'That's your conscious decision and it's not mine, it's my conscious decision to not have one so I will go and do something else.' You just have to fill your time differently when you are trying to quit. I realised when I was trying to quit I had to fill my time with something else and it's better to fill your time with eating a pretzel or having a conversation with somebody or staying inside in the warmth than it is to go outside and try and kill yourself a little bit further.

Do you think smoking is socially acceptable now?

It is so much less socially acceptable now than it used to be. It's frowned upon now, which is so good but you just have to remember that nicotine is addictive and so if you're already a smoker you need to put in some hard yards in order to quit, it's not an easy thing, don't treat it like it's an easy thing, you have to put some effort in to it. You have to care about yourself more than that, more than what smoking does for you. We all know it's bad for us, we all know that it doesn't give us anything good so you have to care about yourself enough to want to look after yourself better. It's crazy that we live in a society where we don't care about ourselves enough already and that's where it comes down to self esteem and insecurities but smoking doesn't make you cooler and it doesn't make you more secure, smoking doesn't make you more secure in yourself, it just keeps repressing emotions and repressing feelings.

You're either secure or not secure?

Yeah but if you are insecure and you want to feel better about yourself it's not going to happen while you are still a smoker because smoking suppresses your emotions, it stops you from dealing with things or moving forward cause it's a drug and that's what drugs do. So you have to get rid of that if you want to move through your insecurities.

Can you tell a non-smoker from a smoker?

There is a vitality in people that is lost when you are a smoker, it saps you. I remember reading a quote in Shantiram by, is it David Gregory Roberts who is the author of Shantiram? It says like all smokers I cared a little bit less about living than I did about dying and I remember reading that quote and thinking, 'I don't want to be one of those people, I care about my life, I love life, I am so excited and proud of my life and I want it to go on for as long as possible.'

What are your thoughts on the tobacco industry?

I put tobacco companies in the same box that I put pharmaceutical companies and the same box that I put fast food chains. None of those companies are doing things to promote life or humanity or goodness in people whatsoever. All of them do things that take stuff away from us as people, so fuck em sucker. The tobacco industry is only concerned in being an industry and making money, they don't give a shit about us, all they care about is selling cigarettes to

us, they don't give a shit that it kills you so you've got to stop them in their tracks. It's so fucked and we put up with it because they have got so big, they have got to this big huge corporate place. We're the only people that can take them down. We are the only things that can take them down from that place and we are the only ones that can take that power away from them. We have got to do it. I don't know how but we have to try.

It feels like we're on the way.

It does. It's amazing the amount of people now that don't smoke any more. All of my friends used to smoke and all of my friends quit within about 3-4 years of each other and it was all in that early 20's to mid 20's time of life when you would just start to care about yourself a little bit more and if you are not then I hope you have got people around you who are telling you that you should, cause you should.

When you first started smoking, did you ever think that you would end up smoking for so long?

No. I think I only ever thought it would be like an irregular and social thing that I would do. My nana used to smoke, and when I was young I would run around the house telling her off, telling her that I didn't like the fact that she smoked and that she smelt and that it wasn't good for her and being the little brat. Hers were the first cigarettes, she was who I stole my first two cigarettes from to try and you know I was a staunch anti-smoker as a child and then I was really shocked when I became a smoker and it was purely because it was the thing to do at that time.

I thought I would smoke for a year.

Right, and now it's like now nobody is doing it, or so many less people are doing it, particularly as you get older. Because so many less people are doing it it's easier for us to go, 'No stop'.

Yeah the thing is how do we tell a kid, say a 16 year old Claire Chitham, cause I know that they don't want to hear that...

Even my brother doesn't want to hear. Watch Mad Men and it's like the perfect example. You watch this program, which is filled with people smoking and filled with smoke in a room and you watch it and you go, 'That's so wrong'. Why is that wrong to us now? It's wrong because we know what it does to us and yeah we got tricked in to it a long time ago, we didn't know it was bad for us back then and it's like any sort of mass population thing, it caught on and now not doing it needs to catch on in a bigger way because we know how bad it is for us. Like you said it's just, it doesn't give you anything and it takes all. I don't understand why so many people would buy in to it but hey, I was one of them.