Interview with Clarke Gayford
Interview by Barnaby Weir

What was your first encounter with smoking?

I developed a distinct loathing for smoking after a beach bonfire with my mates, going, 'What is this smoking thing about?' We rolled this newspaper up and set fire to the ends and proceeded to put our mouths on the other end and breathed in. I will never forget vomiting on the beach that day, and it put me off smoking ever since.

So you have never been a smoker?

The only time I ever smoked a cigarette was when I found out that a girl had let me down with another boy. I don't know why I did it and I felt so sick afterwards. I remember thinking that was even dumber than getting wound up about this particular girl.

What are some of the reasons why you don't smoke?

I like my surfing, and swimming and snowboarding, just the thought that I might be holding myself back from being any better at that because I am restricting my lungs through inhaling some filth. I see my friends who smoke, and I just sit there trying to work out what they get out of it. It's such a bad addiction to have because there is no pay off.

Do you think the attitude towards smoking is changing in New Zealand?

Yeah I think so. When I was younger there was that allure around it because it was bad and you didn't understand why. And now, looking back, just thinking, 'What a ridiculous thing'. I think that the public perception of smoking is definitely shifting away from it being something cool. I mean, you just need to see the dirty smokers outside bars huddling around a cigarette, you know, dying to get back inside literally.

Did you ever feel pressure to smoke as a teen?

I was quite lucky growing up, having a fairly healthy look on life. I have definitely had a lot of friends coming and going with smoking and I've seen peer pressure in the past, particularly when you are young and worried about what everyone else would think, you can see it as being quite an easy thing to pick up and have a go. Luckily for me I have always been able to put my hand up and go, 'You know what? It's not for me'.

Why do you think smoking is such a big thing when you're a teenager?

Well, when I was 12 I desperately wanted to be 13, and when I was 13 I really wanted to be 14, and when I was 14 I wanted to be 15. And I think smoking is much the same way when you are young, you think, 'Stephen does it, that must be pretty cool'. And it's not

until you look back and go, 'What was I thinking? Why did I put that person up on a pedestal just because they were smoking a cigarette?'

When did you realise smoking wasn't for you?

My parents always said, 'If you want to smoke, you can smoke'. Removing that element of it being bad and forbidden actually made me think there was nothing much to it. I guess the defining point for me was when I was seeing this girl who was an asthmatic and she would often end up in hospital. I would end up sitting in the respiratory ward just separated by curtains between all the patients, listening to these people coughing their lives out quite literally through years of abusing their bodies through smoking. Hearing that at night when there is no other sound, just that horrible nasty phlegmy cough. I just sat there thinking, 'Smoking is such a bad way to go'.

What would you say to a young person that thinks that smoking is cool?

You know it is hard to tell a young person anything. If a friend of mine, a guy, is smoking I'm like, 'Smoke up because you are going to have problems with your health and your sexual performance, and girls are going to like you less, so you know, less competition for me is welcomed'. I see some of the girls smoking at work and I don't know if I am getting old and grumpy, but I actually get quite wound up about it. I see them going off for their cigarette breaks and I get quite angry for their addiction and their habit.

What about people who feel they need to smoke to fit in or be part of a group?

When I was at school I always had respect for the kid who dressed differently or who did things differently, and you know, I always tried not to slide down that path of, 'Everyone else is doing it therefore I should'. And it's probably what kept me away from smoking. But if you are a young person and you are going towards smoking because everyone else is doing it then surely you are just giving in, and in this day and age you should be trying to be a bit different.

What do you think is the worst thing about smoking?

The worst thing for me as a non-smoker is that passive smoker thing. I was so pleased when they started that non-smoking in bars rule and got everyone outside. I used to work in a bar during my student days, you'd get home and your clothes would stink and you would feel sick and you'd have these big black bogies stuck up your nose. And it was from all the smoke in the air. That used to really piss me off. just thinking, 'What the hell is this doing to me? I didn't ask for that.'

Do you think people still see smoking as normal?

I think smoking is seen as a particularly nasty thing to do these days. I mean you wouldn't dare do it if you were pregnant. I could never have a relationship with a smoker, it would go against everything I stood for, and part of me would think that that person

didn't give themselves enough respect to quit, to throw it in. It is such a nasty addiction that you need, like, the government to come in and rule it that you can't smoke anywhere. A lot of people I know used that smokefree in bars thing as the turning point to give up cigarette smoking. So through them giving it a good kick in the pants it has really helped turn the tide.

It's interesting that you mention self-respect and selfishness when it comes to smokers…

Yeah, you see some people who get all up in arms, they defend smoking, by saying, 'It's my life'. It might be your life but you are slowly ruining it, you are a friend of mine and I'd like you to stick around. Being such a staunch non-smoker it hurts when you see a friend who smokes and you're thinking 'Why? You don't need that in your life. Why are you inhaling all that foul toxic crap down into your lungs?'

I think it is ultimately a selfish pursuit, and if you are a smoker you should sit there and think, 'How is this improving my life? Is this addiction really improving my life, or is this something I can do without?' I end up feeling really sorry for my friends who smoke and can't give it up, watching them slide into that state of decay…