

INTERVIEW WITH GP WARJU

What are your first memories of smoking?

The taste. It was definitely the taste. My father was a smoker and back then I guess there wasn't the message that smoking was bad. So in the car the windows were up and dad was chain-smoking along, and it was just something you did. You kind of got used to it.

The worst thing I remember was driving along in the car one summer, having an apple and he asked for a bite. He took one bite of it and when I went to bite my apple again I just had to chuck it out cos it tasted like this apple had been cooked in a hangi. That was the very first memory. That was when I realised 'what is the point? If it doesn't taste good why are you doing it?'

Why don't you smoke?

I don't smoke now, but I did once. I was a smoker for about a year and that was the worst decision I ever made. It was terrible. When I was doing it I made up every justification I could. I know smokers do this. They tell themselves that they enjoy it. I admit it was luck that I quit. I've got this book, it's great. I quit like that, like a magic wand. But after I quit I realised how bad it was. It was terrible. It was one of the worst things I've ever done. It tasted horrible.

But the thing is, it is so gradual that you have no idea what it is doing to you, and the next thing you know you are not running as fast as you could. I loved playing sports. I loved playing touch and I was just going, 'what is wrong with my body? It's like one of those commercials.' My body was not keeping up with my mind. I tell you, only two or three months after quitting everything is better, faster.

What made you want to quit?

Guilt. The deciding factor for me to quit was guilt. My mother had watched the love of her life pass away from smoking. And I am her youngest boy, her baby, and there I was with a cigarette in my hand. I just saw the heartbreak in her eyes, and I am not afraid to say it, it put a tear in mine too. You know I just thought, 'what an idiot!' That is when I realised how evil smoking is. As much as I wanted to quit then, it was an addiction and I tried to quit like two or three times for my mother. It was a great reason, for my health, for everything, but ah, it wouldn't let me quit.

I was lucky enough to get a book that kind of just re-brainwashed me in a way to make me realise what was wrong. Geez, that was lucky, but that was it - my mother's heartbreak, family, people who love you, you know, they've watched a lot. I look at the gravestones of my whanau, uncles and aunties. You look at the dates and you think 'they weren't alive very long', and it's because of smoking. I just don't want to go down that route.

This book I read, I don't know if you've heard about [Allen Carr's 'Easy way to stop smoking'](#)? On the first page it asks the reader 'If there was a magic wand, would you use it to quit?' Of course you would. And the last page, it had like a magic wand being waved. I was like 'wow I'm not even trying to quit anymore. I'm a non smoker.' But I was lucky. Lucky enough that my flatmate had that book, otherwise I could still be smoking. I'd still be hating it too cos I hated smoking.

What did you hate so much?

I hated waiting for the movie to finish to go outside and have a smoke. Every car trip it seemed like you had to have a smoke in the car. It is just something that you do. I giggle out loud now when I'm going someplace in my car that before would have been a smoking trip and now I'm going, 'I can't believe that I convinced myself that I needed to smoke.'

The worst thing about smoking is losing your loved ones, or seeing your loved ones in pain. I lost my dad to smoking.

Nobody likes to kiss a smoker, let's be honest guys, we all like our ladies. Ladies don't like to kiss hangi lips, and is there any other reason? Ladies and life. Don't smoke.

It's funny. We talk about smoking and all the negative aspects. You see the anti-smoking commercials. We talk about how our friends don't like it, our family doesn't like it, the smell on your clothes and things like that. Isn't it the most preventable cause of death in the world? And the biggest cause of death in the country - and it can be prevented! What else do you need to say, you know? Why have you got a cigarette in your hand if you know it is killing you? What's the point?

What kind of thing would you say to a teenager who is thinking of starting?

I know it is hard for young adults to listen. I remember being a young adult and thinking, 'I know what my plan is, no one else is going to tell me differently. If I smoke now I am strong enough to quit later.' My advice is you won't be able to just quit, cos I wasn't and I thought I was. Just don't start smoking, it is the most ridiculous annoying, filthy thing you can ever do. Ridiculous is the word. You're a clown if you smoke. Not to quote a million other smoking commercials but you are a sucker if you smoke.

Do you notice a lot of smoking in the music and entertainment industry?

I think the main reason that many musicians and actors smoke is because they think it is cool and relaxing. A lot of people in the music and TV industries, they work these hectic hours and sometimes you're working non-stop for months at a time with big breaks in between. They smoke because of that brainwashing - tobacco industries make us think that tobacco relieves stress but you know what? You get along without smoking. People who don't smoke have stress free lives too. Everyone has stress, everyone is going to deal with it, smokers or non smokers. Non smokers are going to live a lot longer. If you

smoke, it just makes you more stressed cos you will start worrying about your health and your life.

How do you think it affects the performance of musicians and entertainers?

You only have to look at people who have been smoking for thirty, forty years you know. Their health isn't good. But those are all the guys who quit. All those people we used to look up to as being the rebels of rock and roll because they smoked or did drugs or whatever, and these are the guys with their hands up higher than anyone saying, 'Don't do it. Don't follow the same path because we've got forty years experience. You're only into it ten years and you're already feeling the effects. Imagine how you'll feel at my age? Cut it out and you'll live a lot longer and enjoy your music a lot longer.'

I had a great run-in with a band. I won't say the name of the band, a New Zealand band, a very cool band, and I was back stage with them, enjoying the privilege of hanging out in the green room, you know, it is very rock and roll, and I lit up a cigarette. It was when I was a smoker. They politely asked me to put it out. You've never seen a Maori go red like that. I was so embarrassed that I was so uncool with this rock and roll group that that was another one of the big reasons I quit. That's when I found that book and quit. Because this band just made me feel real uncool. I felt like a real sucker eh.

Do you think people see smoking as a normal behaviour these days?

No, I don't think smoking is normal behaviour. I think less and less so in today's social networks. I think people today really feel like outsiders if they smoke, and they are outsiders cos they have to go outside. You know it's wet, it's rainy and they're still going out there and they're making up every excuse under the sun to stay in the rain and smoke.

Do you think the attitude towards smoking has changed over the last ten years?

Smoking in bars - there's an obvious change in attitude there. At least there's an effort there by some organisation to make a change there. But it's got to start with the individuals and that's it. Just don't start smoking.

Why do you think there was a 'cool' factor associated with smoking, especially for young people?

The reason I think people think that smoking is cool is it's a little bit of reverse brainwashing. We see the commercials with the lung and the tar, and the kid in the back seat and the woman smoking. We see that and see how horrible that is but then we look around and see our peers and role models with cigarettes in their hands. And we know how disgusting it tastes. We know how much it makes us cough, those first few, two or three times. But if they're still doing it and they put so much effort into smoking enough to get addicted, there must be something worth doing in that. That's the message that I think is the hardest thing to break. It's a subconscious message. We're not sure why we think it is cool, but there must be a reason for people to try so hard to do something so

horrible. Again it is like banging your head against a wall to feel the relief afterwards.

Why do you think some teens see smoking as a 'rite of passage'?

Smoking is not something you have to do to grow up. If anything, you show your maturity by not smoking. It is just a commonsense fact. You know smoking is going to kill you. You might be eighteen, seventeen, sixteen, but you know smoking is going to kill you in the long run. Make the mature decision now not to smoke. You make a fool of yourself when you smoke, and you make a fool of yourself when you are trying to quit too. Because you know back then that you had a choice to make and you made the wrong one.

Do you think there is something out there to replace the desire young people feel towards trying smoking?

I reckon team sports or being in groups - just enjoying yourself. Boredom is a huge friend of tobacco companies I imagine. They just wait for people to finish high school, sit around, then what are you going to do? Have a cigarette. I think doing something all the time, progressing your life will mean there will be no time for smoking. You won't even think about it.

What do you think of the tobacco industry?

Tobacco companies spend billions of dollars to trick you into thinking that smoking is cool and it's working. You need to wake up and realise that the reason you think it is cool is because people out there are trying to convince you that it is cool.

Do you think young people in New Zealand are aware of the tobacco industry?

No, and I think that if anything, the tobacco industry is manipulating the youth more today than they ever were. When it was on television and they were sponsoring sports events it was out there and people were discussing it and why it shouldn't be sponsoring certain events. Now it is only the subliminal. Your friends are smoking and they are doing it for a reason - there must be something to it and I think tobacco industries love those commercials where they see the lung and the tar, and the pictures on the cigarette packs. I think the tobacco industries will be loving them because it is going to show people how horrible it is, but you are still going to want to do it. It must be for a reason.

There are some sly people in the tobacco industry, with horns in their heads. They might as well be giving babies guns and putting them in a room with the safety off.

The tobacco industry ... no one there can justify what they do. There is nothing beneficial about what they do. I feel very strongly about it. Being a smoker I know that I was sucked in and I gave up a good couple of grand to them, they got it. I was a sucker but never again. They are only interested in your money. They are not interested in making you feel better or cooler or anything. Just your money.

If there was one message about smoking that you could share with everyone in the world, what would it be?

It is ridiculous that smoking is legal. It is unbelievable that mankind lets poison be sold in a dairy next to your milk. It's poison and that is all it is. It doesn't taste good, it doesn't relax you, it does nothing beneficial and everything bad. And governments let tobacco companies get away with it. I just think that it is one of those problems that seems so big, so huge, but we've just got to wake up and not smoke.