

INTERVIEW WITH LEE DONOGHUE

Do you think smoking in New Zealand is on the decline?

I think a lot more people are quitting. I've never really understood it because to start smoking, from what I gather, there's usually a two-week period where you're just coughing and spluttering and you can't bear it. But people put up with it to be cool and to be socially accepted. So my belief is you've got to want to smoke to actually get hooked. You've got to want that image, to fit in. So a lot of peer pressure comes into it as well. You've got to be strong willed and say, 'no, it's not for me.'

Do you think people still perceive smoking as a 'cool' thing to do?

I think it's seen as a social thing still. A lot of people still find comfort [from smoking] at clubs or social things where they're quite shy. It's easier for them to talk to the opposite sex, 'have you got a lighter? How long you been smoking for? I need to quit too etc.' So that's the excuse they use to keep on doing it.

Also, people like Colin Farrell always turning up on the red carpet, durrifying up, with his beanie on and some flash chick beside him, swearing away. The old movie stars too, are always smoking. It's got that 'cool' appeal throughout the film industry.

What is the worst thing about smoking in your opinion?

Just the damage it causes both to yourself physically and also to your family. I've had an aunty that's passed away from smoking, not at a terribly old age, and also my best friend's grandfather just passed away through emphysema. It's not just what you're doing to yourself, it's also how it affects the rest of your family or whanau. I saw in a leaflet that it's the number one preventable cause of death so you're taking away their time with you as well as your own.

From what you have seen, do you think it affects peoples' performances if they smoke?

Well, with Shortland Street there's a few people who smoke and as a performer, your one tool is your voice. It's one of the one main things that you've got to play with and smoking obviously affects that. You sometimes hear people on Shortland Street and you go, 'oh, they sound like a smoker.' Other people have quit smoking, so that's good, and they look better as well. They look better, they sound better, they can cope with the day better because it's long hours.

Would you have any advice for a younger person experimenting with smoking?

My advice would be, if you're finding it hard to get into it, if your body's rejecting it, then follow your gut instinct. Also, I've recently seen a whole lot of people who I haven't seen for a while and they actually look physically older through smoking. You often hear

them say, 'my mouth tastes like an ashtray' the morning after. It just comes down to how you want to treat your body. If you want to abuse it you can, it's up to you, but you're not going to be young and healthy forever, you've got to look after it.

What are your main reasons for being smokefree?

I've always been against smoking, since I was a little kid. My mother doesn't smoke anymore, but my father sometimes when he gets really drunk he'll have a couple of fags with his mates and things like that, and ever since I was a little kid I would tell dad off for smoking. I just think it's really bad for you and with my profession I want to look as young and I can for as long as I can. I think everyone does.

Did you ever try smoking as a teenager?

I got horribly drunk one night and I did have a drag on my mate's cigarette and no, never again!

So even though you aren't a smoker, do you have friends who are?

My best friend's a smoker. He started up and stopped and started up and stopped and his grandfather just passed away, and he said to my friend before he passed away, 'don't ever smoke' because that was the one main thing that ended his life.

What would you say to your friend about smoking?

I'd probably say, 'Rhys you tosser, don't smoke, get some balls and confidence and actually learn to talk to women without having to step outside for a cigarette and feel that whole comfort thing.' There are a lot of people out there too that, like him, don't do anything unless the group's doing it. It's quite a common Kiwi thing. So you shouldn't be afraid to do your own thing, and don't follow the pack, like they did at school when they were fifteen, going around the back of the bike sheds, smoking, that whole clichéd thing.

You said your friend tried to quit a few times?

He has, but I think the big thing when you're trying to quit as a young person is to actually take a break from that social scene as well as the cigarettes, because everyone there is smoking. That would be my advice. As soon as you get a few drinks down ya you start feeling good and relaxed and 'another one won't hurt.' But it's like those ads say, 'every single cigarette, every breath in, is doing more and more damage.'

It's also going to save you a lot of money, I mean let's not forget about the financial thing, you know? You can put the money on car repayments or a few more drinks at the bar, or a taxi ride so you don't have to stumble home.

What would you do to support your mate who wants to quit?

I'd say, 'OK Rhys you need to quit smoking because you're going to have a big scare. Look at your grandfather. He's died of emphysema and he died a horrible death and it affected him a long time before he died as well. He had to live on oxygen and things like that, you know, people like you are actually clogging up the health system. I've got another friend who had cystic fibrosis who needed a lung transplant and people like you are taking lungs away from other people that have no choice in the matter, so stop being selfish and quit smoking.

Did you ever feel peer pressure as a younger person from your mates to start smoking?

I was an oddball actually as a kid, I still am a little bit. I didn't start drinking until I was about twenty-one so I was, I don't know what you'd call that, a straight-edge sort of teenager. But I resisted everything because I was one of those kids that just wanted to do their own thing.

I was about fourteen years old, at one of the first parties I went to with Rhys, and everyone was smoking and drinking. Mum dropped me off with some orange juice and a packet of chippies and I was just like, 'oh my god,' so a guy came up and I had a glass of orange juice, and he goes, 'what are you drinking?' I was about to say, 'oh just orange juice,' and Rhys stepped in and says, 'oh vodka and orange, yeah, yeah' and the guy was like, 'oh yeah, sweet.'

So I think that's one of the main things as a young person to get started if you're a bit of a wuss. Especially with drinking as well - and the two go hand in hand. It affects your judgement, just like with driving, you do stupid things behind the wheel of a car that can kill you instantly, and you do stupid things with cigarettes that can kill you in the long term.

Some people often say, 'I only smoke when I'm drinking.' What do you think of that?

I think the drinking takes away those first boundaries of conscience. Some people won't ask a chick out until they have a few drinks and it's the same with smoking. The logic, the penalty factor of your brain goes out the window and they just go straight for the cigarettes.

As a TV personality and a role model, how do you think your decisions influence younger people?

Well, hopefully there are a few people out there who can relate to me and my age and my character if not my own personality. From what I've said to you, and my own experiences with standing up for myself and saying 'no', hopefully that can filter on through to them. I don't know if they see me as a winner or something for being on Shortland Street or an actor but, you know, even us people that are role models for

society or are in front of people a lot can actually succeed and get places without having to be a sheep and go along with the crowd.

So you're a proud non-smoker?

I am a proud non-smoker.

How do you feel about people trying to quit smoking?

It's never too late to quit. My grandmother had a bit of a scare, she started having sort of sinus problems and so she decided to quit smoking as well. She was fifty-something at that point and she just felt so much better. There's actually a book that I've read lately, do you guys watch Oprah? There's a book, 'You, The Owner's Manual' or something. One of the things it said was that smoking makes you appear eight years older than you actually are, and funnily enough, after I read that fact, my mother came up from Wellington with her friend. Mum is actually forty-eight and her friend is forty and a smoker, and we were talking about age and things like that and she said, 'guess how old I am?' and I said 'you're the same age as Mum, forty-eight, or are you a little bit older?' Her face just dropped and she said, 'oh fuck you. I'm forty man. I've just turned forty.'

What is it that motivates you to not smoke?

I don't smoke because it's my choice to not smoke. I've never been a sheep, a follower of what other people do and I want to live a long healthy life. Professionally as well, I don't want to jeopardise anything. At the moment I'm playing someone who's six years younger than me so if I start smoking and put on another eight years I won't be able to play those roles. A lot of famous actors have said, 'play as young as you can for as long as you can.'

I choose not to smoke because I don't want to limit myself in life or professionally and it's a turn-off to the opposite sex too. I don't go after women that smoke, that's a big no.

Do you think it is OK to be smokefree?

At Shortland Street it's very acceptable. I mean, people are very conscious about what the effect is on other people. I think people are more accepting of non-smokers.

I went to an all boys school with guys who feel it's macho to play rugby and smoke...you know, school's not everything. Your reputation at school's a very small part of your life and when you get outside of school people don't really care if you were the geek or if you were Mr Cool, it doesn't matter. So whatever label you carry through school, whether it be 'he doesn't smoke, he's too good for us' or whatever, it's totally forgotten by the time you're my age. Honestly, it doesn't matter at all.