

Interview with Toni Kaiwai

Interview by Dave Gibson

So thanks for coming up Toni. You grew up with your parents smoking, how did that influence where you stand now on the whole smoking issue?

I just always thought it's pretty horrible, you're inhaling smoke, what pleasure do you get from that? Watching my parents, you'd think they'll be quite influential but I went the other way and it's like, I don't want to do this.

I saw my little brother actually once, after lighting their smoke for them, I saw him smoke in the hallway and I thought that's not cool, he's seven. That is not rad at all, but it's also like, growing up in the country out by the marae you just see it everywhere. You see the big fruit salad tins and the paua shells, which are usually beautiful things full of ashes and smoke butts, which is really hideous. And yeah, I just decided I don't want that for my family and don't want it for my sons. My husband doesn't smoke either.

So your parents would actually ask you to light their cigarettes?

Yeah, well if they didn't have a lighter or anything we had to light them on the element stove top and the thing was, the kitchen was at the other end of the house, so there's a big hallway so you go up - you've got this smoke, you're walking down the hallway with the smoke, inhaling it inside. You know kids, hello.

You're now in a position where you've started a family and you obviously want them to be smokefree?

I do. Obviously they'll make their own choices later in life, but hopefully with this campaign, by the time they are old enough to make those decisions there will not be smoking around anymore, that would be good. I'll try and influence them as much as I can not to smoke. Fifteen years more life, my brother's 15 he'd lose his whole lifetime by smoking. I'd like to see a time when smoking will not be a part of my sons' future.

Can you tell me about how you felt when you heard that your parents had given up?

The thing with my mum is we always used to nag her, and the excuses just kept flowing and flowing. And she did several attempts and then it was just recently she's actually given up for good which is great because you know she's crazy enough as it is she's actually got a son, my brother, a week older than my son Liam. And you know she has to make those choices for them. Maybe we grew up with the smoke, but they don't need to have that around their house.

You've got a close friend trying to quit, do you want to tell us about that.

Yes, won't name names. But I think it's a bit hard for him because it is past the stage where you can't just drop it you know, it is an addiction now. You've just got to keep at it you know, maybe drop down the amount of smokes you have a day, start there, instead of a pack a day maybe half a pack a day and gradually just build down to when you don't need it anymore at all.

He is young, so you know, ladies they don't think that's cool, they don't want to kiss you, you're not going to get a girlfriend if you smell like an ashtray basically. We try our best, we can only do as much as we can verbally, it's him that needs to make the choice and the mindset and the willpower to actually give it up.

Do you think smoking is as common today as it used to be?

Well yeah it's not in the movies as much, it's not cool, it's dying off. Everyone's starting to realise the dangers, the effects, everything that it has on your body and they're like whoa this isn't cool, I am just inhaling smoke into my body, what's cool about that. Like as my mum said, when she was young everyone used to smoke everywhere, pub, bus everything.

I think it's good that the laws have been brought in that you're not allowed to smoke indoors at a pub, café whatever. But then it still sucks that you can sit outside a café and still be allowed to smoke in public because I actually cross the road when I see someone smoking so my sons don't inhale second hand smoke. You know, it's such a shame that it only takes a small walk up the main street for my babies to become smokers.

In terms of your life do you think it's more or less common now than what it was even when you were younger?

Well I used to see it at school, you'd see people in the fields smoking but I think it is dropping down, I don't see any younger people doing it. It's more for me older, 30's maybe smoking. You're not allowed to do it indoors so it limits the amount that you can do it, you can do it at home but that's your choice. Hopefully it will be gone, just eradicate smoking forever.

Across your family like aunties and uncles, are there more smokefree homes or more smoking homes?

More smoking, and it sucks because my mum's European, on my dad's side they're all Maori, you have the higher risks, heart disease, diabetes, that's all there they're adding smoke to it, it's ridiculous, they're cutting off their lifespan for a smoke. And then the other thing that really annoys me, that's when I see like an aunty or uncle buy a packet of cigarettes in lieu of a loaf of bread and some milk, and their family is going hungry tonight so you can have a smoke, that's not cool.

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

It's still in movies, you can go and hire a movie where it's still cool in that movie to smoke so they can be influenced by media, anything. If someone's on TV smoking you're like, oh what are they doing, I want to do that, you know. Like kids imitate, if they see their parents smoking they'll get like a lolly wrapper or a lollypop stick and they'll imitate what their parents are doing.

Do you think it's ever uncool to refuse a cigarette?

No I think it's very strong and to say no you make your choice, that's your own decision and that's really respectful.

What do you think smoking says about a person?

I don't want to stereotype or anything but where I live the majority of the people you see smoking are from a lower income family and it's just, I see smoking just as a bad thing. Not just because I've had children, because I've made the choice my whole life to be smokefree. It's just I see it as a negative way, you're actually choosing to put this into your body, you're choosing to shorten your life. Is that really the choice you want to be making, basically?

When I was pregnant with Tomas my midwife had just come up from Christchurch and she specialises in home birth. See, she said when she moved to Gisborne she was really upset by the fact that she wouldn't recommend anyone at all to have a home birth in Gisborne because of how many people smoke. There's too many risks involved with the birth and stuff, it could go completely wrong because they smoked and it could be passed to their children you know, they could stop breathing when they're born, anything could go wrong. She said it was just horrible to see that you know, this is her specialty and she wouldn't recommend it in this town because so many women smoked. A week after Tomas was born, five babies were in intensive care, all of their mothers were smokers. They were neonatal babies and that's just whoa, take a step back and have a look at what you've done to this newborn helpless child by smoking. You know you could potentially take their life as well as yours.

In what ways do you think someone could support a friend or family member who is trying to quit?

You could substitute, instead of having a smoke let's go for a walk or you can just encourage them. Maybe instead of having a smoke why don't we go out for a coffee, you can spend your money on that instead of spending it on smokes. Just continuous encouragement. If they are trying to quit and they are doing well and then they go back to smoking don't diss them for that, don't put them down, they are still trying obviously, you know it would be a miracle to quit on your first attempt.

You need to carry on, keep going and everyone just needs to be encouraging, you should see them as someone trying to improve their life. Just continuously encourage them, just positive reinforcement all the time no matter what.

Would you consider quitting smoking a real achievement?

Yes, that's a life changing achievement. It's world peace for your own personal choice, really it's great.

What advice would you give a younger brother or sister who had started smoking socially?

The thing with social smoking, it's not once in a while it's not just if you go out with some mates and you're drinking you smoke, you could potentially smoke for life, you could get addicted. Somehow there's this idea that that it's cool still to smoke while you're out socially, but it's not. Obviously with a younger brother and sister that would be really heartbreaking, maybe just a few puffs but that's a few more minutes of your life gone.

So the tobacco industry, obviously a lot of money gets made from cigarettes, billions of dollars.

Ridiculous amount.

Do you have any thoughts or opinions or views on the tobacco industry?

They're such a large corporate industry you know, they've got so much money, so much power, so much grasp on the world now with all the smokers. I remember those little smoking lollies, I actually used to like them, I think they're called spacemen now. Selling those to kids, kids love lollies and they have this little smoke thing, smoking must be awesome - you know it's small things like that. They pay to have their products in movies, they've got so much power.

Do you wish that more members of your whanau would think about quitting?

Definitely, without a doubt everyone should think about quitting. Maybe we can do a whole, first-country-in-the-world thing, get the ball rolling, which hopefully this campaign can do. Being smokefree is the way to go, being smokefree is great for me and my family.