

Addiction letters: Cloquet Senior High School students write about their experiences with tobacco addiction

Compiled by Wendy Quade

Since our Sacred Tobacco Campaign began in May, The Circle has gotten lots of feedback from the community. One school teacher, Wendy Quade of Cloquet Senior High School in Cloquet, Minnesota, had her Ojibwe language students write about their personal experiences with tobacco abuse in their families and community. Here are some of the essays:

I'm an 18 year old Native American enrolled at the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. Many of my loved ones smoke cigarettes or chew and I can see how it's destroying their health, their life, their income, and most of all, their family.

Tobacco was not intended for pleasure but to be used as an offering to the Great Spirit and our elders, and as offerings to mother earth. Every time we go hunting or fishing, gather birch bark or wild rice or just go for a walk in the woods, we put tobacco out to thank mother earth for giving us all these things that our people use.

Nowadays so many young and old Natives abuse one of our most sacred items. Many of our people have blinders on so they can't see what smoking does to their body and their soul and how it destroys their health. Smoking just doesn't affect the smoker, it affects everyone.

When are we going to finally start opening our eyes and see what its doing to our people. How many more newborn babies must be born with asthma because their mom smoked throughout the pregnancy. This is a major problem on all reservations and it saddens me to see our people slowly killing themselves.

I look around the rez and see the smokers getting younger and younger because its the "cool" thing to do. It breaks my heart to know that most of these young Indian people will smoke until the day they die. This subject is very touching considering that about 65% of our people smoke.

I personally do not smoke. It is an addictive thing; hard for anyone to get away from. But with a little help from friends and family you could probably do it. Tobacco was meant to help, not kill. We use it in the wrong way. And that is what kills us.

Anonymous

I've been smoking cigarettes for almost eleven years now. I remember the first puff of smoke I inhaled with my now-blackened lungs. I thought I was cool chillin' with my older sisters as they watched me in entertainment. Back then I didn't understand what addiction was – I didn't even know it existed. Now that I am older and have struggled with many other addictions I have a pretty good idea.

I have done drugs for years, drank for days on end. Nothing in my whole life was harder than going a week without one of my babies filling me up with smoke. I have attempted to quit zero times in my life, but I have been forced to by certain living situations. Some people will say that smoking "is all in the mind." Obviously they have never been addicted.

Smoking is something I do socially, but really it doesn't matter if I am surrounded with friendly smokers or by myself. I smoke when I smoke, when I get that craving. I am Ojibwe and I am involved with the culture deeply and very spiritually. I try to justify that my smoking doesn't affect anyone but me. But from personal experience I know for a fact that it does.

My grandma died from lung cancer. She went through all the pain of cancer when she never took a drag from a cigarette in her life. My grandpa was the smoker, and to this day he is still smoking packs a day. Both of my parents smoked until recently; they have quit cold turkey. When they smoked I could steal as many cigarettes as I wanted. People will be bumming cigs from one another to help them "calm down" or "relax." Smoking is not a healthy coping tool, but I use it.

My lungs are not like other seventeen-year-olds' and I can feel it. I know I am going to get lung cancer, I know this for a fact. But I am OK with it, at least for right now. Maybe there will be a time where I will want to quit, but until then I'm not going to make empty promises.

I like having all the options from the clinic if I would want to quit. I would take full advantage of that. I have much respect and admiration for anyone who quits because I know it is hard, even with the patch. My nephew was six years old when he was giving people money to teach him how to smoke. Why would a six-year-old boy want to learn how to smoke? There are many reasons I think. Learned behaviors maybe, but I think it's the feeling of wanting to belong more than anything. He feels lost on the reservation, just like everyone else does.

Where did the culture go? Where did the respect go? Most of us don't even respect ourselves to want to take care of our own bodies.

Why not stop the addiction before it starts? I just hope our culture can find its way back to our people's hearts and heads.

Anonymous 17-year-old female

I've been smoking since I was 11 years old. I am now 15 and I regret it, I wish I had never started smoking. But it is hard to quit and I am in the process of quitting, it is just taking me a little longer than I thought it would.

Usually when you are a person who smokes, you end up hanging out with people who smoke. People who don't smoke really don't like being around the smell. It bothers them. But sometimes non-smokers don't really mind the smell because they are so used to it.

Once in awhile when I don't have a cig I usually find one of my friends and we take a walk to smoke. So my social life has a lot of people who smoke because I smoke. I think that's why I can't quit as easy as some people, because my life revolves around smokers and smoking. To be around all of your people and not smoke is hard, because everybody else has a cigarette and you're so used to having one right along with them.

Quitting is very hard; when you don't have a cigarette in a long time, you start to get side effects. If I don't have a cigarette when I want, I get frustrated really easy. I also get crabby like a real snakey brat. I really do try to quit but I never follow through with it. I am addicted. I really don't like being addicted but I am. Should I just accept it?

Today I smoke on a regular basis about 8 cigs a day, which is better than I used to be: I used to smoke more than a half pack a day.

Anonymous

My name is Ashley Ammesmaki, I lived on Fond Du Lac reservation all my life. I am now 16. I smoked for two years before my aunt passed away, so I must have been 14. I decided to quite because I saw how it made my aunt look, and how she kept doing it until she passed away. I guess she didn't have the will power; she knew that she was going to die so she just didn't

care about it.

I remember how I'd go over to her house, and see how young she looked. After I didn't see her for almost 5 years. I saw a woman I didn't even recognize. Just smoking for those 5 years that I didn't see her really took a toll on her.

I remember the first puff of that cigarette. I didn't feel right doing it; it just wasn't me! But after a while it really didn't matter, it was a daily thing. I saw that when I played sports my breathing was all hazy and I would hack a lot. At the time I didn't care, until my aunt passed away, then it hit me like a punch in the stomach.

At the time my dad or mom didn't even know that I was smoking, my dad would get hints about it but I guess he never asked.

Smoking isn't me. I'd rather be liked for something I am than for something I'm not. I still have my friends that I smoked with, and they don't care if I smoke or not. Yeah, it sounds like I'm a goodie goodie, but it has nothing to do with that. Just the memory of smoking reminds me of my aunt.

Ashley Ammesmaki

My mother has been smoking cigarettes for nearly thirty-six years. She started smoking at sixteen because of stress. She has bad asthma and has a lot of respiratory problems. She's had pneumonia over four times in the past seven years and has tested out at least four different kinds of inhalers. I get bronchial infections from the secondhand smoke that makes it hard for me to breathe if I get sick.

My mom has tried every quitting method she can. The patches made her sick, the gum made her want to smoke, and the help lines made her angry. Every method either made her sick or made her want to smoke or made her angry or stressed, which of course made her want to smoke. Smoking isn't just an addiction for her: it's a habit. It's not just the nicotine, it's having something in her hand, it's a relaxant. It's a drug.

I remember when I was probably around two or three seeing my mom cry because my father had spent all of the money on cigarettes and alcohol. She stopped drinking for me, but she couldn't stop smoking.

Mackenzie McConnell

I am a young Native American girl. I am sixteen, and I have been smoking for 4 years. I know I should quit but I don't want to. Just recently within the past year I already feel smoking taking its toll on me. Yet I still choose to smoke. More so than ever. My family and friends smoke, so it is hard not to smoke. We always laugh about it, because once one cigarette is lit in a room of smokers, everyone's cigarettes light. Almost like a yawn or wave effect.

My attempts to quit are many, and not successful. As I stated before, I know it is an unhealthy habit, I just don't want to quit. I noticed that this is the way a lot of smokers feel. Maybe a way to help our people is to change this way of thinking. But how, when it is engraved in our lives? We all grew up seeing our elders and parents smoke, now it is what we know. Even though it hurts us to see the people we love suffer, we still smoke.

My grandma had problems with smoking and now she doesn't smoke. When she did it was bad, she ended up getting really sick and was in the hospital for a few weeks. If I remember correctly, they had to remove part of her lung. Today, I know she knows I smoke, and it really hurts her to know that. Then her hurt makes me hurt, but is so addicting that I don't want to quit.

It is a never-ending cycle; first I worried about my grandma, now my grandma worries about me, now I am worried about my mom, then my mom will be worried about me. This is just another chip on the shoulder that Native people could do without.

Anonymous

Nearly every member of my family smokes. I have been smoking for 6 years, since I was 12 years old. At every family gathering cigarettes are involved in all conversations. The habit is hard to break. My uncle who has been crippled for most of his life is now lying in a hospital bed for the remainder of his life with a tracheotomy, collapsed lung, and diaphragm. He will not make it if he is disconnected from the breathing machine. I'm thinking maybe the fact that he smoked most of his life has something to do with this.

I started smoking after my mom was killed, and I moved in with my grandma. It was a way to rebel, but not be a criminal. Also, honestly, I

started to smoke to be “cool.” So I could fit in with the kids around me. All the other Indian kids were doing it. When someone asks a beginner smoker if they started to be “cool” or fit in, they deny it. But it’s always those same people years later that admit that was their exact reason.

I have tried to quit smoking many times cold turkey. I can’t do it. Smoking is so expensive and I hate feeling like a mooch when I am out and borrow a cig. It also gets a little annoying always needing to share with everyone else because like I said, its expensive. I wish I’d never started.

Shelly Tonnanen

I am a 16 year-old Ojibwe female who is very active in sports. When I was a little girl I had asthma, due to all the smokers in my family. My first memory of smoking was when I was about six years old. My Uncle was living with us then, and I recall him smoking big cigars. My grandma, who lives with us as well, used to smoke. She’s had two heart attacks so no longer smokes. My dad, mom, and older sister all still smoke.

My mom and dad have health problems due to smoking. It’s what they do all day, every day. My mom used to have a flowerpot outside, filled with pretty flowers. Today, that flowerpot is an ashtray. I try to keep the cigarette butts cleaned out of it, but by the next day, it is filled again. My mom and dad can barely make it up a hill or up the stairs without being completely out of breath. I think my dad is almost up to 3 packs a day.

I am very angry with my parents for smoking. I’m worried that they will get cancer and die from it. It seems they will choose death rather than quit smoking, and that makes me angry. My dad thinks it’s funny to let my little cousins pretend to smoke with his unlit cigarettes. I don’t think it’s funny at all.

For me, smoking is such a difficult and anger-producing topic that my teacher had to actually type up my words. I just couldn’t do it because it’s too painful.

K.D.

My name is Elizabeth Rilea and I am going to talk to you about my dad and what happened when he couldn’t stop smoking. My dad was fifteen or

sixteen years old when he started to smoke, and now is fifty-four years old. He stills smokes.

He went to the hospital once because he could not breathe. When he got there, they didn't tell him that he had emphysema on his lungs from smoking a lot. So he went to his heart doctor a few days later and told his doctor that he could not breathe.

He told the doctor that he went to the hospital and they did not say why he could not breathe and they took x-rays on his lungs. A spot was detected but they didn't tell him about it. So she took x-rays of his lungs and she found a black round spot on his lungs. She showed him and told him that he had emphysema from smoking a lot. So the doctor gave him some medicine to help him breathe better and to help with the pain in his chest and told him to rest for several days so he could get better.

After a few days of resting he started to smoke again and he says that he would quit but he can't because he is so addicted to it. He will never be better because of his emphysema and his smoking a lot.

Elizabeth Rilea

