Carol Hernandez How My Personal Battle with Smoking Led Me to Educate

I was a heavy smoker for many years, often smoking two or more packs a day.  I tried to quit several times.  It finally took a bad economy, expensive cigarette prices, and setting a target quit date for me to be successful in my goal.  I quit more than 20 years ago and have been smoke-free ever since.

Since I quit smoking, I said I would never be one of those smokers who preaches, criticizes or condemns a smoker, because smoking is part of my history too.  I respect the struggles of smokers because I have been in their shoes.

Not only have I had a personal battle with smoking that I fortunately was able to overcome, but the addiction has also affected my family and friends.  Both my father and sister died prematurely as a result of their cigarette addiction (my father died at age 67 from lung cancer and my sister died at age 59 from emphysema).  Most recently, my friend died at age 58 from lung cancer, also caused by cigarette addiction.  She struggled to accept that she was dying at such a young age from smoking.

My sister passed away around the same time I was feeling the desire to try something new before retiring.  As a Band member who lived away from the reservation, it has always been in the back of my mind to relocate to the reservation and give back in some way.

I was in contact with Gloria Songetay, former coordinator of the Gego Zagaswaaken (don’t smoke) program, and she informed me she was going to retire.  We talked about the Gego Zagaswaaken program and how commercial tobacco addiction affected me and my family.  The position seemed like a natural fit with my personal experiences, my interest in trying something new, and my desire to give back to the reservation.  So, I applied for the job.

As shown by a recent survey of Band members, the Mille Lacs Band has high rates of smoking.  Smoking-related illnesses are the most preventable causes of death.  Gego Zagaswaaken is a program on the Mille Lacs Reservation that aims to decrease those statistics and improve overall community health through education and policy changes.  The program is funded through a ClearWay Minnesota grant.

As part of the Gego Zagaswaaken program staff, I educate people on the dangers of secondhand smoke, advocate for smoking policy changes, and encourage smoke-free events (like powwows and bingo).  Additionally, we are building a community coalition to help strengthen our program’s mission.

The program respects the cultural use of traditional tobacco (kinnikinnick) and encourages Mille Lacs Band members to keep tobacco sacred.  As part of our educational programming, we will be producing a new video that educates people about the dangers of secondhand smoke and promotes the use of kinnikinnick as a replacement for commercial tobacco for ceremonial use.  The new DVD will be shown at the monthly educational sessions that we schedule in each district.

Our long-term vision is to see the Band become a commercial tobacco-free community.  The Gego Zagaswaaken program understands that change takes time and that change is often difficult.  We believe the community coalition will help build a united front to say, “We, as Band members, are not only concerned about our health, but the health of others in the community.”

Through the Gego Zagaswaaken program grant, we hope community education will bring policy change, and policy change will result in behavioral change.  Behavioral changes would result in decreased smoking rates and an increase in overall community health.