

Op/Ed: Breathe Equality

How the Fight for Equality Requires a Smoke-Free Policy an Op/Ed by Joseph G. Lee

Here in North Carolina, we get whiffs from Massachusetts of what it is like to be recognized as full citizens. Equality NC is hard at work to give school children breathing room from bullying, fighting to keep discrimination out of the state constitution, and making sure sex education is more than stale hot air of abstinence.

These are all critical policies that will make real differences in our lives and health. Yet, we as a community too often forget one major issue: addressing the inequality of the very air we breathe. I mean this quite literally. We know that gay men and lesbian women breathe in tobacco smoke more than straight folks. We are 50-100% more likely to smoke than straight people.

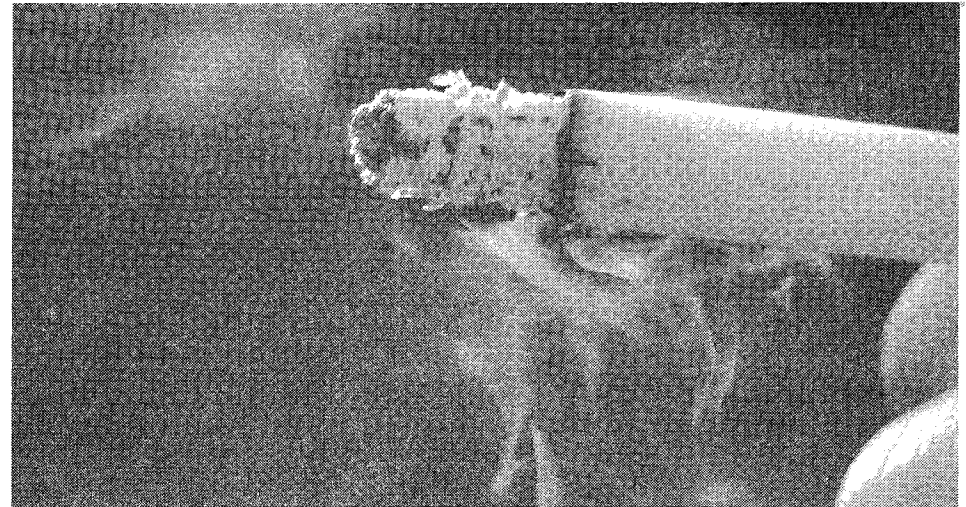
Recent research suggests that the stress of coming out is associated with starting to smoke. Often-smoky gay and lesbian bars have long been community spaces, and asking for a light has started many conversations. Tobacco advertisements are pervasive in the LGBT media. One infamous example is a marketing campaign titled Project SCUM, which was a plan by North Carolina's own RJ Reynolds to gain access to gay districts or, in their words, the Sub-Culture Urban Market*.

Having been born and reared in Madison County with its fields of burley tobacco, I am well aware of tobacco's important heritage in North Carolina. Even as it has built universities and skylines and long been a part of our communities, tobacco has become an unrecognized

and pervasive health inequality that steals lives from communities. It is clear today that the ongoing cost of that legacy is great: tobacco is a leading cause of death and disability in the United States, causing more years of life to be lost than HIV/AIDS, hate crimes, and suicide combined. The Surgeon General has documented that no level of smoking or second-hand smoke is safe. It is likely that tobacco is the leading cause of death in our communities. While we can recognize what tobacco did economically for North Carolina forty years ago, as members of North Carolina's LGBT communities, we must recognize what tobacco use has done to us for the last forty years. Tobacco smoke today will continue to take lives years from now unless we take bold action.

Do we survive gay bashings, bullying, and discrimination only to die years too young of cigarette smoking (all while helping make a handsome dividend for shareholders)? Almost all of us know someone in our community sickened by a tobacco-related disease. We have organized against many injustices, and the National LGBT Tobacco Control Network (<http://www.lgbttobacco.org>) currently leads our fight against this health inequality.

For us to be able to achieve equality, we need to eliminate the persistent health disparity of smoking. Two proven ways of doing this are to (1) raise cigarette taxes, which helps prevent people from starting to smoke, and (2) create smoke-free places and spaces. These policies are evidence-based ways to help those who want to quit, to prevent our youth from starting to smoke, and



to eliminate a potent cancer-causing and heart-attack-causing environmental hazard.

The evidence is clear that smoke-free policies do not hurt business. Smoke-free workplaces (including bars and restaurants) are a major way of preventing exposure to second-hand smoke and helping people quit (and stay quit). Over half of gays and lesbians surveyed by the NC Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch have tried to quit in the last year. If you are a smoker, call the free QuitlineNC at 1-800-QUIT-NOW (7848-669) for support to quit.

It is time to get the smoke out of our eyes. As we continue our quest for equal rights and treatment under the law, we should stop and take note of other factors that are holding us back from being full, productive, healthy

citizens or we will never breathe equality.

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* Project SCUM was a marketing program based on market research done in conjunction with the introduction of the Red Kamel brand in the mid-1990s. In a recent statement to Q-Notes for an article entitled *Stamp of Approval*, Seth Moskowitz, a communications director with Reynolds American said that "Project SCUM was never a finalized or utilized marketing plan." But available documents about the proposal are telling of the way corporations choose, study, and exploit various target markets.

Jazz Pianist Kenny Barron in Asheville

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