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**Matt Comer**  
*Editor*

## Stamp of approval

**Gay researcher questions Human Rights Campaign's perfect rating of Reynolds Tobacco Co.**

Published: March 21, 2009 in [Cover Stories](#)  
Updated: April 2, 2009 at 12:26 pm

Public high schools; libraries and museums; public and private colleges and universities; hospitals; foundations and charities — the list of beneficiaries of the legacy of R.J. Reynolds, his



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family and the Winston-Salem tobacco company he founded more than a century ago is long and valuable — perhaps endless.



There is hardly a Carolina soul who will debate the positive, economic influence Reynolds and other Tobacco Road tycoons had on this state, its people or its society and government. But one openly gay researcher at the Tar Heel State's premier "public ivy" isn't convinced that Reynolds American, the tobacco company's corporate parent, is deserving of all the praise it's been getting from the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest LGBT advocacy organization.

Joseph Lee, a social research specialist in the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill Department of Family Medicine's Tobacco Prevention and Evaluation Program, says that Reynolds American shouldn't have received a perfect 100 score in the 2009 HRC Corporate Equality Index (CEI).

"Being from Madison County, I am not denying the long heritage of tobacco in North Carolina," Lee told *Q-Notes* in an interview via email. "But, today, we cannot deny the huge amounts of harm tobacco use causes in North Carolina and to the LGBT community."

In a late February letter sent to the Human Rights Campaign — copied to *Q-Notes* and others — Lee outlined his argument for reducing Reynolds' CEI score.

"While it is perfectly legitimate to report on the workplace policies of the tobacco industry," Lee wrote to HRC, "I believe you may have overlooked the evidence on corporate responsibility and inadvertently and incorrectly given a perfect score to Reynolds American Tobacco (sic)."

Released annually, the CEI ranks Fortune 500 companies, and others, according to the LGBT-friendliness of corporate policies and practices. Scoring criteria in the "corporate responsibility" section of the CEI requires that a company must exhibit "responsible behavior toward the LGBT community," and show that it "does not engage in action that would undermine LGBT equality." Fifteen points are deducted from the scores of corporations found to be engaging in harmful anti-LGBT activity.

Lee said that Reynolds American, and other companies, have exhibited poor corporate responsibility toward their LGBT customers. In his letter, Lee said that the company has shown "irresponsible and cynical behavior" toward LGBT people through its marketing of a "product ... directly and unequivocally linked to death and disability." Lee says that Reynolds American's actions have created a "health inequality" and that "disproportionate numbers of lesbian women and gay men

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smoke and suffer from the resulting death and disability.”

Lee contended that his main opposition to Reynolds’ perfect 100 score stems from evidence of the company’s history of marketing has increased tobacco use among LGBT people. Study after study confirms that disproportionate numbers of lesbian and gay adults and youth smoke.

“By giving a perfect score to Reynolds American, the HRC is promoting health inequalities, not corporate equality,” he said. “Until tobacco companies stop selling addiction and disease to LGBT communities, they should not be included in an index of equality.”

Lee’s page-and-a-half letter was referenced and cited 25 times with research studies and reports, some as recent as this year, showing that LGBT people are more likely to start smoking because of stress from discrimination and oppression, persistent and targeted advertising by the industry and exposure to smoking environments, such as gay clubs and bars.

“For better or worse, bars and clubs have long been an important part of our communities,” Lee told *Q-Notes*. “Many bars are, in fact, paid by the tobacco industry to allow and promote smoking. It is the social environment of smoky places, discrimination and targeted marketing that pushes LGBT youth to start smoking.”

Sally Herndon Malek, director of the Tobacco Prevention and Control Branch at the N.C. Division of Public Health, told *Q-Notes* that her program had attempted to gather information specific to North Carolina lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) communities and their smoking habits.



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In 2004, she and other staff attended the NC Pride Fest and Parade in Durham. Out of a small sample of 136 surveys collected there — one of the only Carolina-specific attempts at LGB tobacco use data collection — Malek found a higher rate of smoking among LGB adults (42 percent) than the general population of adults in the state (24.8 percent, in the same time period). Among non-smoking LGB respondents, 47 percent said they were most exposed to second-hand smoke in bars.

In particular, her community survey showed that 59 percent of the North Carolina LGB youths aged 18-24 reported using tobacco products. She said that only 31.3 percent of youth the same age report smoking in the general population.

“Rates are higher across North Carolina in that population [of 18-24 year olds] in general because there was a cohort of young people who were smoking at higher

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rates,” she said. “We have been successful in North Carolina, beginning to put some things into practice that really help prevent tobacco use initiation among young people.”

In a publication of the community survey results, Malek and her staff ceded that the sample size was small, but that the data collected provided “some insight into tobacco use prevalence in the LGB population in North Carolina.”

Daryl Herrschaft, director of the HRC Foundation Workplace Project, told *Q-Notes* via phone that the national organization is cognizant of the health-related ramifications of tobacco use. “HRC does not accept sponsorship dollars from tobacco companies because we recognize the harmful effects that tobacco has done, and in some ways its disproportionate effect on our community ... We don’t want to play a role in advocating smoking to our membership and to people who come to our events.”

He said the CEI scores aren’t meant to reflect anything other than a company’s treatment of LGBT employees.

“The Corporate Equality Index addresses only corporate policies that impact LGBT people,” Herrschaft said. “It also addresses external actions of the company that directly and primarily impact LGBT equality. The Corporate Equality Index is only one measure of policies for LGBT employees and we strongly encourage everyone to seek out and pay attention to other indicators that are important to them.”

Herrschaft said that CEI scores are based on corporate policies and practices relating to non-discrimination policies, health insurance policies and domestic partner benefits, as well as corporate actions such as supporting anti-gay organizations or taking positions on legislation that hurts the LGBT community.

The CEI scoring “is not the right information to be looking at,” he said, if one is concerned primarily with the health of the LGBT community.

Lee said HRC should be taking into consideration the harm companies cause through other actions outside of legislative and philanthropic arenas. He cited Reynolds’ “Project SCUM,” or “Sub-Culture Urban Market” plan.

In his letter to HRC, Lee claimed that Reynolds had “planned Project SCUM (that’s Sub-Culture Urban Market) to target gay men in the Castro District of San Francisco.”

In a written response to several questions posed by *Q-Notes*, Seth Moskowitz, a communications director with Reynolds American, said that Project SCUM was never a finalized or utilized marketing plan.

“It was a proposal in a document from one [of] R.J. Reynolds’ sales offices for a marketing program called, Sub Culture Urban Marketing,” Moskowitz explained. “This

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inappropriate and offensive document presented an idea for marketing cigarettes to adult smokers who chose alternative lifestyles. The proposal was never pursued or put into action.”

Moskowitz added, “In 2001, when R.J. Reynolds became aware of this document, the company saw that it used language that was unacceptable, inappropriate, offensive and insulting and the company publicly apologized. The document did not reflect the opinions, policies or practices of the company — in fact, it could not have been more opposed to R.J. Reynolds’ operating philosophy and practices.

“This thoughtless document did not, and does not, represent R.J. Reynolds’ view of, and respect for, its customers and employees. Rather, the company used the discovery of that document as a catalyst for communicating once again to its employees the management philosophies and practices by which the company is to be run.”

While the Project SCUM plan was never put into action, Lee nonetheless feels the company has used advertising to draw in new LGBT customers for Reynolds cigarette brands.

“The tobacco industry uses similar strategies of making products more available and more appealing today,” he said. “Instead of calling us scum, the industry talks about inclusion, diversity, and responsibility. Either way, the purpose of targeted marketing is getting LGBT youth and adults to start smoking.”



An anti-smoking campaign targeted to LGBT San Franciscans by SF Pride.

Moskowitz admitted that R.J. Reynolds Tobacco, as any other company would, wants LGBT consumers to choose their brands over others. “If the ultimate question is this: does R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company want LGBT adult tobacco consumers to use an R.J. Reynolds brand instead of a competitor’s brand — the answer is, yes. The company would like to earn the business of all adults who have made the choice to smoke cigarettes or use tobacco products.”

He said that “gay adult tobacco consumers, like the rest of the adult tobacco consuming population, have the same ability and right as the rest of the population to evaluate and make informed decisions about whether or not they want to use tobacco or any other consumer product.”

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Although the company hasn't run any print advertising in more than a year, Moskowitz said that the company had, in the past, run cigarette advertising in publications like *The Advocate* and *Instinct*. "It would not be appropriate to exclude gay audiences or media from R.J. Reynolds' brand communications," he said.

R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company and its corporate parent, Reynolds American, adhere to equal opportunity policies in employment and hiring — policies that include sexual orientation and gender-identity.

Moskowitz said the company strives "to ensure that LGBT employees are treated the same as other employees." In 2002, R.J. Reynolds included LGBT employees and their partners in medical, dental and vision benefits under a domestic partner plan.

Lee is adamant in his opposition to giving undue praise to tobacco companies. "We have to stop the addition to the tobacco industry's flattery and money," he said. "All the tobacco industry's marketing and promotion (including its inclusive policies) do is help sell cigarettes. Tobacco company 'social responsibility' to the LGBT community means a higher body count in Winston-Salem and beyond. It does not mean more rights and less discrimination.

"Smoking in LGBT communities is a social justice issue," he added. "Tobacco is the only legal product that when used correctly leads to disability and death. Our communities smoke considerably more than straight folks, and we thus suffer from earlier death and more disability due to tobacco-related diseases. As a community, we have not faced so many obstacles only to lose our lives early from smoking."

— *Are you a smoker? Want to quit? Get help by calling QuitlineNC at 1-800-QUIT-NOW (7848-669)*

*and visit [www.becomeanex.org](http://www.becomeanex.org). Both are free resources. Find more LGBT-specific information at [www.lgbttobacco.org](http://www.lgbttobacco.org) and [www.gaysmokeout.net](http://www.gaysmokeout.net).*

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### *InsideLook: 'Stamp of Approval'*



*I'm a Winston-Salem native, born and raised in the city built in large part by Mr. Reynolds' tobacco company. I'm a graduate of R.J. Reynolds High School. The personal connections I have to this story are outrageous — all because I happen to be from the city in which the company was created and continues to operate.*

***Read editor Matt Comer's "inside look" on this piece***

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