

Connecticut Post

May 29, 2010

Free will and nicotine addiction on trial

MariAn Gail Brown
Connecticut Post columnist

Every trace of his mellow, live-and-let-live "Big Lebowski" aura evaporated as the biker caught sight of the Connecticut Post headline "Jury awards smoker \$8 million."

"F[@\$?!]ing unbelievable," he says, flicking ashes on the ground outside the Starbucks in Trumbull, where he holds an alfresco court among his buddies. "Do you believe this? I don't. This (woman) smokes her whole life and she wants to make the tobacco industry pay for her choice. That's some nerve."

For a few moments, biker dude -- whose clothes, by the way, reek of smoke -- forgets to take a drag on his cigarette. "Everybody knows smoking can cause cancer," says biker dude, who looks to be in his late 50s and has smoked most of his adult life.

He rolls his eyes and skims the article about a jury awarding \$8 million to Barbara Izzarelli, of Norwich, who developed throat cancer and had to have her larynx removed. He has no intention of quitting, not that he couldn't if he wanted to. Izzarelli's victory is something he "just can't abide."

So how did a jury of nine, including three smokers, conclude that cigarette maker R.J. Reynolds was more responsible than Izzarelli for the throat cancer she developed after 25 years of smoking Salem cigarettes?

The answer lies in the mountain of exhibits, which included internal memos from R.J. Reynolds on its desire to hook young kids. It included scientific research from the cigarette manufacturer on the optimal amount of nicotine to include to make teens crave their smokes and fill them with a sense of euphoria, well-being and calm. Izzarelli's attorney, **David Golub of Silver Golub & Teitell**, likens what R.J. Reynolds did to creating a nicotine addiction. All it takes is an average of five to eight milligrams of nicotine a day to create an addiction, which equates to about six cigarettes, far less than a pack.

Izzarelli's nicotine habit began with her foster parents buying her "cigarettes by the carton." She was only 12. For doing chores like washing dishes, taking out the trash and keeping her room clean, they rewarded her with cigarettes. It was also how they punished her -- by withholding them if Izzarelli forgot any of her chores.

Izzarelli smoked one to two packs a day from the time she was in elementary school to just before surgery to remove a tumor in her throat in 1996 at the age of 36. The tumor was the size of a half-dollar. The surgery also removed her larynx.

Living without a larynx is not like going without tonsils or an appendix. When surgeons remove a larynx, it means patients can never breathe through their nose or mouth. They forever lose their sense of smell. An opening has to be cut in the throat and a tube inserted to keep the hole from closing.

"They tell you what life is gonna be like after the operation -- that you'll lose your voice, too, but that doesn't even begin to prepare you," Izzarelli says, her voice vibrating with a metallic hint from another spot in her throat. She can't chew most solid food unless it's cut into itsy-bitsy pieces so she won't choke.

"I used to love to swim. I swam all the time at the beach," Izzarelli says. "Now, I can't do that anymore." If the tube fills with water, it would be like drowning in her own body. "When I shower, I have to hold my hand over the opening (in her throat). I take a very fast shower, only a couple of minutes now because when I cover the hole, I can't breathe. It's like suffocating."

Connecticut Post columnist MariAn Gail Brown can be reached at 203-330-6288 or mgbrown@ctpost.com.

©2010 Hearst Connecticut Newspapers