

Interview with Bronwyn Turei
Interview by Dave Gibson

Kia ora.

Kia ora. Can we start by you describing your current smoking status?

I'm an ex smoker as of four years ago. I gave up when I got my first acting job and I thought that was a good reason to stop. I just went cold turkey and since giving up smoking I have had a few times where I've sort of had a few at parties and things and you just wake up feeling terrible the next day but that's never a reason to get started again.

Did plan it so that when you got your first acting gig that was when you would give up?

Nah, it just seemed like a good idea at the time because it was a kids show and I was going to have to be running around and jumping for a good few hours in the day and I didn't want to be collapsing and coughing my lungs up all over children or trying to sneak off behind the bike sheds and have a quick one and smelling like smoke around the kids. I just thought that was a really bad look and really unprofessional. I thought there were a whole heap of really good reasons why I should give up then and so I did.

You went cold turkey obviously but that first month would have been pretty hard. Did that first big job come back into your mind when you were craving a smoke, like 'that's the promise I've made to myself'?

It did but it wasn't so much about the job in the end. It was about me being stubborn and not wanting to let myself down because I get pretty huha about things. I get really stubborn and if something could beat me like that then I'd just get really annoyed at myself. So I ended up giving up smoking and alcohol and drinking coffee all at the same time. I know I wasn't a very nice person to be around but it was mainly because I was so used to having that first morning cigarette with the cup of coffee or cracking open a bottle of wine. So for about the first three or four months I didn't drink any alcohol as well, which was really good. I felt really good. It was amazing. You get your taste back, your sense of smell back and you don't smell. You actually realise when you go somewhere and hang around smokers how much you reek of it the next day and even in your hair. I never knew that when I was a smoker it's kind of crazy.

Yeah it's amazing. You feel like you have super smells eh?

Yeah, I was working at Burger Fuel and you could smell when somebody had walked in off the street who had just had a quick smoke while they were waiting for their burger and as they come up to you it's like this engulfing cloud of stench.

You must have felt great after four months of no coffee, no alcohol, and no cigarettes?

Yeah, well I felt cleaner. I felt lighter. I mean it's all those sorts of things. I feel so great I've given up smoking and everyone should do that.

Do you think smoking is as common now as it used to be?

No. With all the stuff around smoking in bars being banned and I heard Turkey has just tried to implement it now and they're like the superstars of smoking, they were smoking at the Olympics, I mean it was ridiculous. I think nowadays if you see someone smoking inside it is weird, it's like, 'What are you doing?' so I think the mindset has slowly changed.

Do you think that smoking is as socially acceptable as it used to be?

No not at all. I think there's definitely more of a stigma around it now and there should be. The shift is good. There are way more young kids saying to their parents, 'You should give up'. We've got quite a few smokers in our family and the younger generation that are coming up, like my little cousins, that say 'Ooh why are you a smoker? That's dirty. Didn't you know that?' and all these facts start pouring out.

Why do you think it has changed?

People's information, and knowledge is more readily available these days and it's sinking in. Because of the addictive nature of it, you want to believe whatever you want to believe and I mean, what is it, heroin is actually less addictive than nicotine?

Why do you think young people are still taking up smoking?

I guess my own theory is that because of the slow filter of ideas around smoking changing, our generation and the adult generation that are having kids are still sort of in that smoking bracket so the kids are growing up with smoking being a normal thing. That's why they're still picking it up; it's a familiarity. I watched my nana and I have vivid memories of her standing next to the kitchen bench with a cigarette in one hand and her asthma inhaler in the other and just alternating. So yeah, my nana and all my aunties and my uncles smoked and so I just remember the smell of it being quite comforting which is a bit odd. And I always said 'I'm not going to smoke, it's yuck' and I just woke up one day and I was a smoker and it was so bizarre.

How old were you when you started?

12.

Do you remember smoking happening on the marae when you were growing up?

Yeah, nobody was allowed so you had to go outside the gate, which I always thought was really good and there was this big, old industrial-sized Milo container with the wrapper ripped off and with a little bit of sand in the bottom. I never actually saw anyone smoking inside the grounds inside the marae but there was always a gathering outside. We would have competitions to pick up all the smoke butts around the place to see who got the most and whoever came back with the most smoke butts won a prize.

When you were a girl, playing that game, did it make smoking seem normal to you?

Yeah, totally. Like when you're surrounded by it and everyone you care about does it, it is such a normal thing. Mum used to get me to roll hers; well this is when I was a smoker though. She couldn't be bothered doing it so if we were having a Christmas or something and we were going out for the day and she had rollies, I'd just sit there and roll a good bunch of them for her and she'd be like, 'Oh thanks love.'

Does your mum still smoke?

She's trying to give up. When I told her I was doing this she said, 'Oh now I'm going to have to do this eh?'

Talking about that bond you mentioned, what do you do with your mum now to have that same bond?

Well, instead of me and mum hanging out and having a cigarette together we'll hang out and we'll listen to some new music or we'll go for a walk together or something like that. I was trying to get her into a bit of the old exercise and stuff so maybe I'll get her on a bike next time and see what happens.

Have you worked out how much money you spent on smoking over the years?

Lots and lots and lots. Ridiculous amounts of money on something that just goes like that and you've got nothing to show for it afterwards. It came down to a point where you had to choose between buying bread and milk for the week as a student or buying a \$6, on-special bottle of wine and a \$10 packet of cigarettes and you go, 'Ah gee this is such a hard choice. You know I can't live without my cigarettes so I'm going to buy those.' And you just don't eat or you scab food or you're like, 'Oh that looks really good, are you going to finish that? Did you make it? Oh you must be a really good cook' and so on and so forth until they're like flattered enough to give you some food.

Now that you've quit, do you notice you've got more money in your pocket?

Yeah, well I notice that I am more logical with the choices of what I'm buying. I'm not bound to anything. I'm not bound to buying a packet of cigarettes or buying a bottle of wine. I'm free in my choices.

In your opinion, what's the worst thing about smoking?

That it undermines your will power, that it takes away your logic, that there's so much denial attached to it. You're not free anymore and you don't even know it. I just find that kind of frustrating that I didn't even see that I was completely addicted and I had no freedom.

How has quitting affected your work performance?

Well I stopped getting sick so much when I was performing because I'm an asthmatic as well, how stupid is that?

Really, really stupid. You should be proud that you quit.

Asthma inhaler in one hand, ciggie in the other but yeah, I was able to perform better when I quit. My voice was much better because you're doing singing and yelling and I had more control over it. There wasn't that fear of 'Oh my voice could crap out on me or I'll end up having a coughing fit.' I felt much more energized as well because for some reason you think that you're taking time out for yourself when you go out and have that cigarette but you're not. It's not a relaxing thing. I thought I needed smokes to relax but actually it was the smoking that was causing me to stress.

Being smokefree sends a message to the young people who look up to you. What do you think of that?

Well I hope that it shows them that you don't need to smoke. That at the end of the day, it's a choice you can make and if your role models don't need to smoke then you don't need to either.

In what ways can someone support a friend or family member who is trying to quit?

Super, super encouragement. Like if they have only had two smokes in the day instead of 20 like they usually do, that's awesome. I always give my mum heaps of support and praise whenever she tells me she's gone a few days without cigarettes and stuff and I tell her how proud I am of

here because it's positive reinforcement that helps. And the more empowered you feel in yourself, the further you can go. It's just little steps.

Do you think using services like Quitline is a good thing or does it show a sign of weakness?

Nah. Take any help you can get because it's one of the hardest things to give up so there's no shame in asking for help. Absolutely none. I think the best idea is to get as many tools in your arsenal to fight it.

Would you consider quitting smoking a real achievement?

Yes. I think for me it's right up there in my big life list of things conquered, done, ticked off and experienced.

What are your thoughts on the tobacco industry?

Oh, stop making cigarettes. I think they've just got to stop cashing in on people's addictions. They've got a billion dollar industry going on.

Do you think there's more we could do in New Zealand to reduce smoking?

I've always thought that smokes shouldn't be on display in shops and supermarkets and dairies and things like that. They should be a specialty item that you have to ask for and it's not shown so it's not so acceptable as right there, so normal to look at all the time. Like just start slowly taking it out. Cause after a while it would sort of become this thing you don't see as much. It's out of sight, out of mind and when people pull out a packet of cigarettes it would be the same thing as seeing people smoke indoors, you'd be like, 'Oh that's a bit weird.'

Did you experience barriers when you tried to quit that first time?

Yes, my partner decided that he wasn't quite ready to quit yet so he was smoking and I was trying to give up. I wasn't annoyed at him because it wasn't his time but I was having to ask him to brush his teeth about five or six times a day. It was like, 'Nah you stink. Sorry, I love you but you stink.'

Does he still smoke?

No, he gave up fully.

Were you the supportive one for him when he was trying to quit?

Yeah totally and he was way more PMS than I was when he was trying to give up. He was so angry but it was good, we rode it out and have come out the other side. And now it's weird, we don't even remember being a smoking couple and yet we spent entire weekends where we didn't really eat much, we just smoked and drank coffee. It's funny how soon you forget. It's like how your body forgets pain after it experiences trauma.

How did you cope with your cravings when you were quitting?

I drank a lot of water that was one of the things that I learned. I wasn't actually too bad with the cravings because I was super stoked with myself for having the will power to push through so it was like, 'Ha-ha I can do this. You're not going to get me' but the water really helped.