

Interview with Sara Tetro

Interview by Dave Gibson

What is your current smoking status?

I'm a non-smoker. I've never smoked as a smoker. I've done the odd, stupid, 2am cigarette with a couple of mates but I'm not an inhaler. I'm also asthmatic and as any asthmatic will testify, breathing's a luxury, it's not something you actually automatically get by right. So, as an asthmatic, the concept of being smokefree is essential, not something that you would think about, it's just what you have to be.

Did you have other reasons to not get involved heavily in smoking?

I've never been interested in smoking. My father gave me a cigarette when I was about 6. A pink one, with a gold tip and said, 'Drag on this hard' and I did and I think it was enough to put me off. Luckily he was a doctor so he could have revived me if I'd needed it because I definitely felt like I was going to choke.

Wow, that's quite a controversial method.

Yeah, it's not a method I think that he would really want other people to do but it worked. You know those days of Coco Chanel and the Marlboro man looking great, it was an era and I can see why people bought into it but the reality is now that the romance of smoking is gone.

Do you think smoking is as popular as it used to be? Why has that romance been lost?

I would like to hope that smoking is not as popular as it used to be. The numbers of people that you see smoking now have definitely declined from what I've observed. Obviously going out, you can't smoke inside, you can't smoke in restaurants and people having to go outside, I'm assuming, is a deterrent. Again, not being a smoker myself, I can't honestly say if that's something that would have slowed me down or would have stopped me, but you definitely see less people smoking now and you have less second hand smoke to contend with. Being an asthmatic, second hand smoke is not something I'm prepared to tolerate.

In the industry that you work in, do you think that smoking is socially acceptable?

The industry that I work in is largely driven by trend. You know, trend, fashion, cool, that's what the industry I work in is governed by and you will see in magazines the imagery and the image of people smoking has dropped dramatically, which is great. There's nothing that I hate seeing more than a young girl in a magazine, smoking. It's not something girls aspire to and it's something that we talk to the girls about a lot,

you know, being cool or being accepted or wearing the right colour denim or the right shoe or the right T-shirt or having your hair in the right colour is one thing, if you want to aspire to that, it's probably not going to harm you, but aspiring to something that's going to kill you and make you look old is not something I would advocate.

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

I suspect some young people are still taking up smoking because of peer pressure. I think there's a lot more information available to you, even if you're not looking for it, it's out there, the posters are out there, the ads are out there, if you pick up a packet of cigarettes, even as a non-smoker, I'll often see the back of a packet of cigarettes somewhere and the very clear messages are hard to turn away from. So I would like to hope that public awareness has risen and the reality that smoking can halve your life expectancy, has got through.

What would you say in terms of smoking, to young, aspiring woman who look up to you?

I work with a lot of young people and I'm in a position where I can talk to them about smoking, drugs, drinking, that kind of thing. I'm not their parent but I'm a person that they will listen to and we make very clear to the people we represent that smoking is something we are not interested in tolerating. Apart from the obvious health risks and costs, the fact that smoking is clearly detrimental to their appearance, the lines, the texture of their skin, the colour, it's just not something that can work.

In your opinion, what is the worst thing about smoking?

In my opinion, the worst thing about smoking has got to be that it's going to kill you. In my opinion, smoking's a disaster in many different areas. It's costly, if you want to earn money and waste it on smoking, waste it on whatever you want. Providing that doesn't affect anyone else, that's your business, but the one thing that just crushes me about the concept of smoking is that you take up something because you're in a situation not to say no and you're stuck with that. It's a really difficult thing to drop. I've watched people I love try and stop smoking and it's not that easy. The downside that simply can't be ignored, is that one in every two people who smoke, will die from a smoking related disease.

One of the other things is that obviously young people live in the now and so the concept of dying, although it's there, it's somewhere that seems far away...

It's very hard for any young person to think about themselves as a mother, as an old person, as someone that could become one of those statistics. But I can tell you, as a young person, I can see if you've been smoking and the affects that it has on your appearance. No one looks good in grey, you know, with a grey pallor, with smokers lines, it's just not a good look, unless you want to be Bad Jelly.

As a woman who works with a lot models, what's your opinion on smoking in the way that it affects their performance or ability to work. Things like stamina, fitness, do you see that impacting your girls at all?

Stamina and fitness for a model are not the same as in an elite athlete. What the greater effect is, is on how you actually look. While a model might not have to be physically fit, they need to look healthy and they need to look fit, but the obvious effects from smoking on you skin make you unfit to work. You don't have to be a model to want to look your best and for any kid that wants to go to a school ball or wants to impress that guy they've seen at the bus stop, they want to look their best and you just simply don't look your best when you've had a cigarette hanging out of your mouth.

Can you tell a smoker from a non-smoker?

I can pick a smoker from a non-smoker from a great distance.

Do know anybody who's had any success with quit services like Quitline or with nicotine products?

I made a few calls this morning to some people I knew who had given up smoking and they'd used various tools. Nicorette gum, Quitline...the common theme that came through from all of them was that they had to make that decision they wanted to give up. There are many tools around that will assist the process but at the end of the day, I think you need to want to stop and the people around you are essential tools in that process.

Have you supported anyone who has tried to quit?

Yeah, I have. I've seen first hand the devastating affects on a long-term smoker and I've watched people I know lose the battle. It is one of the single ugliest things I've ever seen. My father was a heavy smoker but he had whooping cough and it eradicated basically the top lobes of his lungs, so that was a major contributing factor in his death, but he also smoked. He smoked Pall Mall plains, unfiltered.

In the right image, with the right clothing, with the right lighting, anything is going to look glamorous, but the reality is, when you've seen, first hand and you've witnessed the ravages and the reality of someone dying from a smoking related disease, it is truly horrific.

Would you consider quitting smoking a real achievement?

I would have to say that quitting smoking would be up there on anyone's list of greatest achievements. Not only have you beaten something that many people will never beat in their lives, but you've gifted yourself and your family the greatest thing

you can and that is potentially a lot more time that they would have had. It's never too late to stop smoking.

Do you think using quit services, like patches, gum and lozenges means that you are too weak to quit by yourself?

I think using anything you can get your hands on and any tool that makes the process a success, is nothing other than one of your greatest achievements. To consider a patch or gum a failure or an inability to do it by yourself is just simply ridiculous.

What advice would you give to your children if they started smoking socially? Like your daughter for instance...

I wouldn't let her live in my house, I would chuck her out. You know, but we've said that. Not under my roof. As a parent, I would never tolerate a child of mine smoking and if they wanted to live in my house, they would have to live under our rules. They know the rules in our home and if either of them came home smoking, they would simply have to find somewhere else to live. I am prepared to lose to win and if it means my child not being friends with me, then I'm prepared to wear that cost to save them.

What about other young people in your life? What would you say to them?

I talk to my nephews and nieces about this. Being a parent is one thing, but when you see someone you love or someone you know, you are actually in a really powerful position to help because you are not mum or dad telling them, 'You can't smoke', you're actually someone else and sometimes that's a very powerful position to be in. If you choose to smoke, you are choosing to play Russian roulette with your life, it's just that simple. It comes down to odds. You wouldn't take the same odds in any other facet of your life and with a 50/50 chance, the gun to your head, who would be dumb enough to pull that trigger?

When someone is faced with that decision about whether to try smoking or not, what advice would you give them?

I think you're always going to be faced with decisions and peer pressure. You need to make a decision yourself, far before you get to that point. Am I going to smoke? Am I going to drink? Am I going to do drugs? When the heat is on, it's 2 o'clock in the morning, you're out with your mates and everyone else is smoking and you're the only one who isn't puffing away, are you going to be strong enough to make that decision? At that given point, feasibly, no. You have to make that decision long before that moment. You have to make the decision long before the peer pressure and that first crucial moment when you're offered a cigarette, to be a non-smoker.

I'm just thinking about my first cigarette. It tasted like crap, I had to really work at that aye? And then I started smoking like you wouldn't believe.

The thing is, I can understand and I don't judge people who started smoking under various circumstances whether it was without the knowledge that we've all got now. If you are one of those people that made a decision at any given point in your life to smoke, it doesn't mean it's over, there's a number of times and a number of steps that you can take to stop that, but the reality is, you have to make the decision yourself that you want to stop smoking. You have to want to be smokefree.

Do you have any views on the tobacco industry?

I don't really know an enormous amount about it myself but they kind of seem like the mob. Smoking's just one of the most brilliant pieces of marketing I've ever seen, it's Russian Roulette wrapped up in some beautiful branding. You hear about the tobacco industry, you read the stats and the damage that tobacco does, but really they're kind of a shadow, faceless image in this country. They never front up. When people ask me what I do, I can answer with pride. I would be interested to know, what a member of the tobacco industry answers when they are asked, 'What do you do?', 'Oh, I make cigarettes that kill children. Great, it's great, I work in an office with no name.'

Do you think we could actually make New Zealand a smokefree country completely?

I would love to see New Zealand be a smokefree country. We hold ourselves up as clean, green, you know, oasis at the bottom end of the world, but we've got this huge epidemic of smoking and drug use in this country and I can't see why we don't have zero tolerance. Someone should take that first step. The reality is there are always elements available to kids, teenagers, adults, that are detrimental. You could argue that if you are going to remove cigarettes, then you have to remove high fat, high salt foods, because eventually they are going to clog your arteries and kill you. You have to empower people with the ability to make their own decisions and you have to take responsibility for your own actions. You can't say, 'Well someone sold them to me', you have to say, 'I chose to say no. I chose to be smokefree.'

Why did you never smoke?

It never occurred to me that smoking was something I would have considered doing. As a kid, my father smoked. I saw the effects that it had on his health and I knew that even though he smoked, he would never tolerate me smoking and I mean, I grew up in an era where when your dad said 'no', 'no' it was.

What about at school? Was there ever any pressure to smoke?

There's always pressure at school. It's probably one of the toughest times of your life and I never felt the pressure to smoke, to drink, to do anything else that the other kids were doing and I have no doubt that that came from the environment I grew up in.

Not all kids are empowered with the ability to say no, so they have to make a conscious decision and eventually, the buck stops with you.

You strike me as a pretty empowered, onto it woman. Do you think that quality you had as a kid to stand strong against pressure has carried over into your professional, adult life?

Of course. Being a woman in business and having the ability to say 'no' to a cigarette and, 'I'm smokefree and I don't care if you're all going to smoke', is a trait that you might not realise, but it follows through in any other areas of your life. It's a great feeling, you know. I'm really proud of the fact that I can say no. I said 'no' to smoking and there are other things I say 'no' to. I feel great about that every day of my life.

That's great advice.

I've often heard people say you have to learn by your own mistakes and that just floors me. Why would I have to smoke to realise that it's really hard to give up, especially when I can see how hard it's been for other people? Learn from other people's mistakes, not your own. That was a really strong theme for me growing up. I'm the youngest of four kids and I've got three older brothers and when we grew up, we had that very strongly jammed down our throats, learn from other people's mistakes. When I would look at my friends and think, 'Well how come they can do that? How come they get to try things like that and their parents had the 'they've got to learn themselves' mentality? I grew up in a family where that was just simply not an option. You learnt from other people's mistakes.

Have you ever been tempted to smoke at a party?

Oh, yeah, of course. Not sober. You know, it's so normal to be tempted, to want to have a cigarette at a party, if everyone else is having one. It's tempting to want another piece of cake, I mean that happens in every area in your life. It's just the fact that there are some things you just simply shouldn't do and it's cool to be smokefree.