

INTERVIEW WITH SHAVAUGHN RUAKERE

As a teenager, did you experiment with smoking?

Not at all actually. None of my friends smoked. It was just not even thought about. I think I also heard from my parents, even though they were both smokers, that it was a really bad thing, and I was never interested in it either. I really wasn't and I never had pressure from any friends when I was a teenager at all.

When did you first actually think about buying a pack of cigarettes and starting smoking?

A couple of years back. I was living overseas. I wasn't working. I was bored and I had a lot of friends who smoked. I just picked up a pack of cigarettes one day and for the only time in my life actually smoked during the day and it was purely out of boredom. I just wanted that thing in my hand, and it was a social thing. Then I just totally stopped after a couple of months. I wasn't even enjoying myself. I don't even know why I did it.

In recent times I've become a sometimes social smoker again. It's only when I'm out. It's only if I've had a few drinks, you know? I would never think of smoking during the day. I would never buy them myself.

Do you see the effect on others who smoke heavily?

Well, that's one of the things that's turned me off smoking the most and it's so vain, but it's the idea of getting all those lines around your mouth. I hate the idea of that. It affects the skin and you know you hear people with their smoker's cough. I think the grossest thing in the world is seeing a person smoking at the beach on a hot day. It's just such a turnoff and you think, 'god, that must be so unhealthy.'

Do you notice a lot of smoking in the entertainment industry?

Absolutely, and that's probably why I've started smoking again because I am hanging around a lot of people in that industry and a lot of my TV friends and muso friends do smoke. I'll give you an example, at the B Net awards last weekend, probably a third of the crowd were outside and most of them were smoking. You are surrounded by it.

Does it affect you when you smoke?

I physically feel it the next day if I've had a few smokes the night before. I feel congested. Often I can get a sore throat. You just can't breath as naturally or as well and I just feel a bit 'blah'. I feel so bad every time without fail. I feel really disappointed in myself. I just think, 'what if I get lung cancer? I'm not even a proper smoker. What if that happens?' But I still go and do it again, so I *really* want to stop that.

How long have you been social smoking for?

It's funny, because I like to say, 'I'm a sometimes social smoker' but really that means I smoke. Just because I don't do it when I'm not drinking, I'm still smoking. I'm still putting all that bad stuff into my body but I'm embarrassed to say I smoke. I didn't even want to really say it here but I was like, 'I have to.' I totally have to but there's such a stigma that's attached to it in my mind. I never want to be a smoker.

Why are you embarrassed to admit you smoke?

Because most of my friends don't smoke and there are definitely people I wouldn't want to ever see me smoking. I would never smoke around kids. I'd feel so irresponsible because of course when you're a kid you just want to do what the grown ups are doing. I have a lot of friends who thinks smoking's horrendous and disgusting and yeah, I would feel embarrassed if they saw me smoking or knew I was smoking. They'd tell me right to my face. They'd be like, 'dude, what are you doing? Gross.'

Have you tried to quit before?

Yeah. Because I'm still in that 'sometimes' phase, I think that I don't need to quit, but in actuality doing this, coming here, this is my clincher. This is my reason to go never, ever, ever again and I really want to stick to that. That's a big call, but I'm like, 'nup, this is it.'

With something as addictive as smoking you can't expect to give up the first time I'm sure. A guy I work with, he's just quit. He's on the eight-week mark and I said to him, 'are you feeling the cravings?' and he said, 'do you know what? Nah, not at all.'

Do you give him support?

Oh my goodness yes. Anyone who's trying to quit, because even though I personally haven't felt that addiction to it I totally realise that it happens. It must be horrible and really, really hard for people to quit, so you've got to be encouraging. You can do it. You can quit. You'll feel so much better for it. If at first you don't succeed, try and try again.

So do you want to quit?

Yeah, completely.

Do you think these days it is just as cool not to smoke?

Oh yeah, especially because I'm older now. I would never feel pressure from anyone smoking. I don't think it's cool at all. I feel bad when I smoke but it does still have a social stigma attached to it where if you're inside somewhere and all your mates want to go outside to smoke, it becomes a case of, 'am I going to sit here by myself?', and chances are you go out with them just to hang out. I'm happy that smoking's been banned inside but sometimes you end up going out with them and someone offers you one and there

you go.

Do you think that most people who do smoke are happy smoking?

No. My friends who smoke are always like, 'yeah got to quit. Yeah gotta stop doing this.' No one's happy that they're smoking, heck no. You know, they're putting something in their body that says it kills you on the packet.

Do you still think it's a rite of passage for kids to try smoking?

I think as I was growing up it probably was a rite of passage for so many kids. I hope with kids these days that the advertising and these sorts of campaigns, plus all the information they're getting is getting through to them. Fingers crossed. As a Maori female I hate hearing about teenage girls being the highest percentage of smokers.

Do you see yourself as part of that statistic?

I feel like I don't smoke all the time but smoking at all is not good. I don't like hearing any bad statistics about Maori people and with that one it feels like a lack of education. Who's out there telling these girls, you know? They grow up with it. They're surrounded by it, and what are we doing to stop it? I'm hoping that me being here could possibly help.

What would you say to these girls, if you thought it would make a difference?

Respect your body. You're putting all this crap into your body and don't think that it's not hurting you, because it totally is. Respect yourself. Respect your body. You're better than that.

What is it about smoking that you think resonates with that particular group?

I don't know why these girls are smoking, apart from that they've been around it all their lives. They've just grown up around it so it's got to start at home. I don't know if it's any different from any other teenager and the peer pressure or whatever.

Would you have any advice to a young person in your position, a 'social smoker'?

You shouldn't look at it as a 'sometimes' kind of thing because I just think of that ad that says, 'Every cigarette is doing you harm.' So, even though you might be going, 'oh but it's just a couple a week, or a couple every fortnight, every single one is doing you harm.

Why put yourself in that position where it could become an addiction and something that you don't have so much control over? At the moment I'm like, 'hey, I can take them or leave them. I seriously can', but for someone else it might just be that it builds up. It builds up and before you know it you're a full-blown smoker and it's not a matter of being able to put it down, you're drawn to it. That's scary.

I mean if it's a peer pressure thing, get out of that. Who cares? Honestly, if they're true friends they're not going to care whether you're smoking or not. We all know that, come on! If it's just that you're standing around a group of friends and you're smoking just for the hell of it, maybe you should remove yourself from the situation. True friends care about you, they're not going to want you to be doing something that's harming you.