

*Presentation to Oregon Community College Student Association 9/8/09*

My name is Rebecca Geary. I am the mother of three grown children, grandmother of 8, and a nursing student at Mount Hood Community College. I was born and raised here in Portland and have traveled quite a bit in and outside of the United States. I have visited some very beautiful places (with a lot less rain!) but have chosen to stay in Portland all of these years in part because of the clean air.

I'm here to talk to you today about second-hand smoke on the campus. Secondhand smoke has always been offensive to me, but now it's completely intolerable. Almost 2 years ago, I was diagnosed with lung cancer. At the end of 2007, I underwent extensive surgery to remove one of my lungs and other suspect tissues, followed by weeks of chemotherapy and months of nausea and no hair.

I have fought very hard to expand the capacity of my one lung up to near capacity of two lungs. I make a concerted effort to always avoid places that will cause me to breathe toxins. For instance, when I go for a walk, I walk either in a quiet neighborhood with little traffic (to avoid car exhaust), a park or at the gym. I don't go to social gatherings if I know smoking will be permitted.

I find myself becoming anxious and stressed if I am suddenly in an area where I'm breathing something that's potentially dangerous. But while walking on campus, I can't get from the parking lot to the science department (my favorite hangout) or from a classroom to the bookstore without being forced to breathe second-hand smoke. There are smoking kiosks around the campus, but not everyone smokes IN the kiosk, and the smoke itself definitely doesn't stay in the kiosk. There also those who are noncompliant....smoking in the parking lots, walkways and other common areas on the campus.

For the person with diminished breathing ability, walking up a flight of stairs can be a chore....I know this from experience. For the first few school terms after my surgery, I was very winded when I had to walk up a flight of stairs (and MHCC is on 2 floors, so going up and down the stairs is unavoidable) More than once, I got a lung full of cigarette smoke on the way up and had to stop because I couldn't breathe. There again is the problem with "designated" smoking areas.

I realize that I'm only one person, and everyone on the campus is not as sensitive to smoke as I am, but, as a nursing student, I can tell you that **everyone** breathing the second-hand smoke is at risk of grave consequences.

And, there is the issue of accessibility for everyone. There are other people on the campus that have medical issues that make it hard for them to breathe: According to the CDC, over 9% of Oregonians suffer from chronic asthma. This doesn't even touch on the number of people who experience seasonal asthma. There is also bronchitis, COPD, lung cancer, emphysema, upper respiratory infections, flu and even the common cold can make breathing more difficult. You may see people on your campus with chronic disease or afflictions every day and not realize it....because people don't always openly talk about their illnesses.....for whatever reason.

And what about the children on our campuses? Whether you have Headstart, a regular daycare, or highschool students, there ARE children on your campus, and they are being subjected to cigarette smoke. At MHCC we have a Headstart facility on the premises. The building is located behind most of the academic classrooms in a separate building, but the children occasionally get a field trip across the campus – they follow their teacher like a row of baby ducks.....right through the smoke.

You may believe that smoke inhalation has no immediate impact on yourself or anyone else around you...on the contrary....2ndhand smoke (smoke that somebody else has already filtered for you through their own lungs) is known to contain at least 50 cancer causing chemicals. According to the US Surgeon General, if you smell it, it could be harming your body.

Smoke inhalation is not only a problem to be considered by long-term exposure.....there is clear evidence that ANY exposure can be harmful.

**Carbon monoxide is known to have “no 'safe' level, no level below which adverse effects do not occur.” See Comment, “Legislation for Clean Air: An Indoor Front,” 82 Yale Law Journal 1040-1054, at 1045 (April 1973).**

Carbon monoxide binds to hemoglobin in RBC's which prevents the affected cells from carrying a full load of oxygen.

Nicotine is used as an insecticide, and is poison to warm-blooded animals. It crosses the blood-brain barrier and travels to every part of the body....including breast milk... within about 10 seconds of being inhaled. In addition, a partial list of the chemicals inhaled from a smoldering cigarette include ammonia, hydrogen cyanide, mercury, tar, nickel, lead, cadmium, chromium, arsenic, formaldehyde and acetone – most of which are carcinogenic.

One of the opposing arguments to a tobacco free campus that I've heard has been that people have the right to smoke because it's a legal drug. While this is true, it's also true that you and I should have the right to breathe air that is not potentially going to kill us.

As college campuses, we are in the business of furthering student knowledge. As institutions that train future healthcare workers, does it make any sense to be training them in a carcinogenic environment, or that “tolerance” has to include putting everyone's health at risk?

MHCC recently decided that it was not consistent with the values of the college to provide designated areas for the purpose of engaging in or subjecting others to such deadly behavior. So, as of January 2, 2010, MHCC will be tobacco-free. I am very proud of MHCC for acting on this important issue.....being considerate of the well-being of all students, staff and visitors to the campus. MHCC joins Clark College, PCC and OHSU (among others) in implementing this important change.

So, as you consider the future of your respective schools, I would ask that you make it a priority to ensure that we all have the opportunity to enjoy a healthier campus free of secondhand smoke. Let's work toward creating a level playing field for all college students.