

Stop and Smell the Nicotine

Warning: Cigarettes may result in emphysema, cancer and camaraderie

By STUART HUTSON
The Battalion

It was not long ago that smoking was glorified. It was difficult to find a movie or television series in which the lead character did not light up and, with a smarmy charm, inhaled and exhale curling streams of smoke to make him or her seem like the sexiest being on the planet.

Everywhere, people lit up to re-enact this rite. Smoking was welcomed in bars, restaurants, homes and even in the classrooms and residence halls of Texas A&M.

Professors tell tales of classrooms of yore, where students would unceremoniously puff away, creating a cloud of smoke so dense that the professor could not read the clock on the back wall.

Those days are over. In the '70s and '80s, revelations that smoking can result in cancer and emphysema caused a scare, and rebellion against smokers became so severe and sweeping that anyone who refused to put down that pack of Marlboros was treated like a communist during the McCarthy era.

Since then, student smokers living in residence halls have been forced to huddle outside their halls to enjoy their favorite cancer-inducing product in the companionship of other tobacco industry patrons.

In this exile, a strange bond is formed. "A smoker can almost always find a friend in another smoker," said Michael Wagner, a senior English major. "If you see someone else who is smoking, you can just go up to them and talk."

"Like the other day, I was sitting in the Kettle (restaurant), and I needed to borrow someone's lighter. Well, I asked, and it turned out that we just sat and BS'd for a while. It's not the same in the nonsmoking section. You don't ask, 'Hey, can I borrow your fork.'"

Places convenient for smoking quickly become havens for miniature societies. Alcoves or benches in close proximity to residence halls, apartments or classrooms become meeting places where new friendships are formed and maintained.

"There was a bench out near Hobby Hall where a set of girls would always sit at weird hours of the night; we called them the Hobby six-pack," said Joseph Hammon, a senior economics major. Wagner said a similar setting can be found outside the John R. Blocker Building.

"There is a little cove in front of the building with three benches," he said. "I always go there if I have a little time before class because I know there will be another smoker there I can hang out or have a discussion with."

Nothing can break this bond, at least temporarily, like a visit from parents.

"Whenever somebody's parents come into town, the person is always like, 'Don't offer me a cigarette and pretend like I don't know you,' because they don't want their parents to know that they smoke," said Jennifer Duncan, a freshman anthropology major. "I don't know why. I guess the parents would see it as being irresponsible."

One big advantage of being forced outside to smoke is that it often allows for time to appreciate the small pleasures of the outdoors.

"Most people just rush inside the buildings to their class, but once you are sitting in the classroom or in the hall, the only thing you are thinking about is the test or homework for that day," Wagner said. "Smokers will take a few minutes to take the last few drags off their cigarettes and, in the meanwhile, appreciate the weather or take a look around on a sunny day."

Those lying in bed on the fourth floor of their residence halls may not look forward to the view outside, however, after they go through the effort of climbing down three flights of stairs.

"Smokers should have first call on first-floor rooms," said Jerry Haire, a

sophomore computer science major. "We're the ones that go outside the most; plus, nonsmokers can handle going up the stairs better anyway."

Some, however, use this constant ascent and descent to their benefit.

"Are you kidding? Smoking is the only thing that keeps me in shape right now. ... I live on the fourth floor," said Michael Kemp, a freshman computer engineering major.

Of course, smoking has its downsides, like cancer, smelling bad, emphysema, fetal death, etc. But most college-age smokers have a plan to quit at some point. "When I don't enjoy cigarettes, I will quit — probably sometime after college," Hammon said.

"Until that, I just remember what Dennis Leary said, 'Sure, smoking takes 10 years off your life, but those years are the years at the end that I wouldn't want anyway.'"



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