

Tobacco... An Aboriginal Right... to Die?

By Beverley O'Neil

She sat in the back of the room and when she lit her cigarette and began to passionately inhale its fragrance, the room of Police Officers and judges immediately turned their heads in unison. It was as if a bomb had exploded and this bomb smelled like marijuana. But no, it was just Malyan Michel, a woman from our nation, the Ktunaxa, enjoying her tobacco, eyes closed peacefully, inhaling deeply and holding the smoke into her mouth for what seemed like an eternity. I'd wonder if it would seep out of her ears, but eventually it would drift through her nose and she would blow the remains high into the air.

Malyan was as feisty with life as one would expect a twenty year old woman to be, except she was in her 70s and she still went into the mountains to her favorite ancestral places for gathering herbs and leaves and tobacco the way she was taught by her ancestors many years ago. Her cigarette, well it wasn't store bought, it didn't have additives and it wasn't addictive... very unlike the cigarettes of today. Malyan was a traditional woman, she didn't subscribe to addictions and she believed in values and respecting your culture.

I remember once I received tobacco as a gift, being a non-smoker and not knowing what to do with it, I went to Malyan to give it to her and to learn what to do with these offerings in the future. I didn't know how to receive tobacco, or how to properly dispose of it, but I did know that this woman I considered my Grandmother would direct me on what to do. All I knew about tobacco was that it was a great honour to receive it as a gift and that it had great spiritual and medicinal powers. I was overwhelmed with the symbol of esteem I'd received, but quite frankly, in contrast, I was white with fear that I would do something wrong and then suffer the consequences of offending the Tobacco God.

I told Malyan how I came to receive the tobacco and my concern and ignorance of what to do with it. She looked at me through her eyes that had seen her people go from nomadic, independent and free, living throughout the Kootenays and speaking the Ktunaxa language fluently, to a dependent nation with way too many people addicted to alcohol, drugs and tobacco. And I could see the pain in her face as she said nodding her head up and down, "Ahhh, yes. You must be very careful taking tobacco, but I know what to do with it."

And she took the pouch of tobacco and walked away.

I felt a strain remove itself from my body and I recalled hearing her say often to the young people in our community, "You don't know your language. You don't know your culture. Shame on you." I knew I was no different. I too didn't know what to do.

That was almost ten years ago and the awful truth is that today Malyan's dream of having her and all First Nations people know their culture are the cinders left behind from every Craven A, Marlboro, Camel and DuMaurier King Size Light cigarette smoked based on the justification that it is a part of our "Aboriginal culture". But if Malyan were around today, she would tell you it is not. That excuse of "Aboriginal culture" is perhaps reflected in the high rate of tobacco use amongst Aboriginal people being almost double the rate of the non-Aboriginal Canadian and more than half of the Aboriginal adult population being smokers. And it is a fact that at least half of these smokers will die from smoking related illnesses such as lung cancer and emphysema... another Aboriginal right?

Sadly, the spirituality connected with tobacco in the Aboriginal community has been lost, as it instead has morphed to a substance associated with addiction and abuse, as well as a favoured pastime of North America's poor and minority people... Blacks, Native American's, Alaska Natives and Canadian Indians.

Unlike the tobacco that Malyan and many First Nations once used, today's tobacco is addictive. Marketing efforts are targeted at not only the poorest, but also the most vulnerable people in society -- the underemployed, the less educated, and the young who want to feel older. Well, the young are guaranteed of that if they become smokers. Research reveals that one-third of young people that start smoking today will die of tobacco caused illnesses by 2030.

The deadly effects of tobacco are not confined to the user itself. Second hand smoke increases the non-smoker's risk by 30 percent of a heart attack and lung cancer. For pregnant women who smoke, the effects of tobacco are transferred to their baby. Tobacco has been attributed to fetus abortion, still birth, lower birth weight and babies born with heart and lung problems. And, lung cancer has become the leading cause of death amongst women surpassing breast cancer... the difference between lung and breast cancer though is that lung cancer, tobacco related illnesses, is preventable.

Dr. Dennis Wardman, an Aboriginal person working in Health Canada's First Nations and Inuit Branch and on health programs, affirmed that "tobacco is the number one cause of preventable death" that results in 50 percent of tobacco users dying from illnesses caused by their use. "Amongst First Nations", he said, "misuse is estimated at 62 percent, which in BC means that roughly one-third or 35,000 of the Aboriginal population today will die from their tobacco use."

If so many tobacco users dying from their use... one would think that the industry itself is dying. But instead, tobacco companies know that they need to continue to attract new people. They know that if they can get a youth to try smoking in their early teens, than by the third cigarette, the youth will be addicted for life. So, if tobacco is so addictive and deadly, as well as damaging to pregnant women and their unborn children, why is it still used? And, why do so many communities allow it?

Things are changing. Efforts are being made.

The First Nations Chief's Health Committee, the First Nations Summit and Health Canada's First Nations and Inuit Health Branch's launched their No-Tobacco campaign at the Squamish Recreation Centre as part of the May 31 World No-Tobacco Day. This five-year program is based on empowering First Nation driven and designed Tobacco Control Coalitions, which total 11 in BC First Nations communities. These Coalitions are charged with the mandate to change attitudes toward tobacco use including preventing use amongst young people, and encouraging reduction and quitting through education and community policies.

The Squamish Nation is one of those Coalitions. Chief Bill Williams acknowledged that part of their program would be to emphasize cultural values. He said, "...children grow up without the proper [cultural] teachings" about tobacco use and "... if use and misuse becomes excessive, any cultural teachings are lost.

Supported by four anti-tobacco posters targeting adults who smoke around their children, youth who are the highest at risk, encouraging children to lead healthy lifestyles, the Coalitions will work with their Band governments to establish policies and programs to reduce and eliminate tobacco use in their communities. They'll do this by creating smoke-free spaces in Band operated buildings and schools, including bingo halls,

increasing the cost of tobacco, and providing services to help smokers stop smoking and prevent use. Good strategies for all Aboriginal communities.

The program launch was endorsed by federal Minister Ethel Blondin Andrew who emphasized that Canada's participation for the 16th time in the World Health Organization declared day reaffirms "Aboriginal people's entitlement to clean air, a world fit for children, a right to a life span without respiratory illness, and the right to reclaim tobacco's spiritual role in our communities." A dream that Malyan had.

Beverley O'Neil is a citizen of the Ktunaxa Nation, and a consultant and trainer with O'Neil Marketing & Consulting, as well as a marketing strategist and media relations' advisor in Numa Communications Ltd., as well as a freelance writer. Tel. 604-913-1905 www.designingnations.com