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Gruen Von Behrens' Missing Jaw

Smokeless Tobacco Quitting Tips

Gruen was just thirteen and on a camp-out with friends when one pulled out a can of snuff he'd stolen from his father's dresser drawer. "I thought, 'Why not?'" he said. "I was 13. I had not a care in the world. So I took a dip." "At first it made me kind of sick and real dizzy. Next thing I knew I was addicted."

By age 14 Gruen Von Behrens was seriously hooked on nicotine. At his peak he was consuming more than half a can a day. Then it happened, at sixteen he noticed a small white spot on his tongue, a spot that would gradually start to grow.

"As a teenager, [Gruen] was a handsome lad who hit .400 for the local Comets and wanted to play for the Chicago Cubs. Ryne Sandberg was his hero. 'The only things I cared about were baseball, food, and women, in that order,' he said. At the high school field he still can point out the houses in the neighborhood beyond the center-field fence that he hit with home runs."



But now something was gradually eating away at his tongue and Gruen was slowly beginning to realize that he likely had cancer. He decided to hide it from his mother, a nurse. The 5'10" ball-player recalls sitting in the bathroom asking God why this was happening to him.

When his mother kept asking why he was slurring his speech, drooling, and why he couldn't seem to keep food in his mouth he'd tell her that it was his wisdom teeth.

His mom would discover the truth when she surprised him with a visit to the dentist's office. According to the Gazette story, "once in the dentist's chair and about to be put under anesthesia, [Gruen] admitted the truth. 'It's not my wisdom teeth, I have cancer,' he said, as the dentist peeked into his mouth. The dentist nodded to his mother." Gruen had squamous cell carcinoma.

"I've never seen my mom cry like that," Gruen recalls. "It ripped her heart out." Doctors gave him a 25% chance of survival going into his first surgery. "At 17, you're not supposed to think about life and death issues," he said.

One week later a 17 year-old boy would undergo 13 hours of surgery followed by a month of recovery in the hospital. Then came the radiation treatments. Within six weeks he'd lose 70 pounds, lose the skin on his face, his mouth would become a blistery white mess and his teeth would rot.

At 19 "doctors transplanted three inches of bone from his back to his face to give him a jaw. The transplant lasted two days. Then his body rejected it."

Now 40 operations later at age 27, his lower face severely disfigured, his lower teeth and jawbone gone, half his tongue and neck muscle missing, his face patched with skin and muscle from his leg, Gruen pleads with all who'll listen, "don't do it, it ruined my life."

In slurred speech in crowded school gymnasiums across the nation he tells students, "I know I'm a little hard to understand, so you're going to have to bear with me and listen." "This isn't a mask I can take off and throw in the closet. I'm like this 365 days a year."

"I'm not here to preach to you," he tells them. "I'm not saying all of you will get cancer, but a few of you will."

Gruen tells students that "the inside of [my] mouth is grayish, like hamburger that's spent too much time in the sun." "Doctors have cut skin from his leg to cover his face wounds" and "extracted muscles from his chest to rebuild the floor of his mouth."

"I have a beautiful fiancee I can't marry because I look like this," he said. "I walk into Wal-Mart and I hear kids say, 'Mommy, Mommy, look at him. Why does he look so funny, why does he look so scary?'"

Gruen is working hard with the National Spit Tobacco Education Program to correct the false belief that smokeless tobacco is a safe alternative to smoking. Tobacco causes cancer, no matter how it is absorbed by the body.

"I wish someone came to me when I was experimenting and using it and I saw how he or she looked and talked," he added. "I used to be good looking. I was the guy all the girls wanted to date. I was a good baseball player, but I can't play now."

"If I had known then what I know now, I never would have put a dip in my mouth," said Gruen. "Spit tobacco seemed harmless, but it has ruined my life."



Story Update

Sadly, Gruen's story needs updating. According to the [Effingham Daily News](#), "Gruen Von Behrens, 38, of Stewardson passed away at 4:45 a.m. Tuesday, Sept. 8, 2015, at his home after a long battle with cancer."

"Gruen was born May 14, 1977, in Mattoon, the son of Tina (Zike) VonBehrens. He graduated from Stewardson-Strasburg High School in the class of 1995 and later attended Lake Land College in Mattoon. Gruen married Sara M. Pruemmer on April 26, 2008."

"He was a motivational speaker who dedicated his life to raising awareness to the dangers of tobacco. Gruen was an avid outdoorsman, who loved to hunt and fish. He enjoyed cooking and was very involved in showing sheep with his family. Gruen's motto was "live life to the fullest," which he truly did."

"Gruen is survived by his wife, Sara and two daughters, Katelyn and Claire."

[Smokeless Tobacco Quitting Tips](#)

Sources

The above fact compilation was compiled on November 15, 2004 by John R. Polito using facts, extensive quotations and images from the below referenced online sources:

1. Garret Condon, "State Rips Plan To Label Snuff 'Safer' Tobacco", Courant, July 11, 2002
2. Picture of Gruen with a student - Illinois Dept. of Health
3. Maggie O'Neill, "Personal tragedy turned into warning against teen tobacco use", The Record-Courier, January 23, 2004
4. Stan Grossfeld, "For One Youngster, Life Changed Forever", The Boston Globe, July 6, 2004

5. Gruen Von Behrens May 14, 1977 - September 08, 2015, Effingham Daily News Obituaries, September 8, 2015

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Learn More About Smart Turkey Quitting

- [WhyQuit.com](#) - WhyQuit is the Internet's oldest forum devoted to the art, science and psychology of cold turkey quitting, the stop smoking method used by the vast majority of all successful long-term ex-smokers. Left to right, WhyQuit is organized under three headings: (1) Motivation, (2) Education and (3) Support.
- [Nicotine Cessation Topic Index](#) - An alphabetical subject matter index to more than a thousand nicotine cessation articles, videos and support group discussions.



- [Smokeless Quitting Tips](#) - Key cold turkey nicotine cessation tips on how to stop putting nicotine into your body and bloodstream.
- [Nicotine Addiction 101](#) - WhyQuit's guide to understanding nicotine dependency.
- ["Freedom from Nicotine - The Journey Home"](#) - Written by John R. Polito, a former 30-year heavy smoker and WhyQuit's 1999 founder, Freedom from Nicotine (FFN) is a free nicotine dependency recovery book that documents the science underlying nicotine dependency and successful cessation. Whether hooked on cigarettes, e-cigarettes (e-cigs), bidis, kreteks, a pipe, hookah or cigars, on dip, chew, snuff or snus, or on the nicotine gum, lozenge, spray, inhaler or patch, FFN provides a comprehensive yet easy to follow road-map to freedom from nicotine.
- [Turkeyville](#) - Imagine surrounding yourself with more than 10,000 cold turkey quitters. Turkeyville is a Facebook support group exclusively for cold turkey quitters. The group's primary focus is helping newbies navigate the first few days. Just that first brave step, yes you can!
- [Joel's Library](#) - Joel's Library is home to Joel Spitzer's "Daily Quitting Lesson Guide." The Guide walks new quitters through the first two weeks of smoking cessation, recommending daily videos to watch and articles to read. Joel's Library is also home to more than a hundred original short stop smoking articles, to Joel's free ebook Never Take Another Puff, and to his collection of more than 400 video stop smoking lessons.
- [Joel's Stop Smoking Video Index](#) - An alphabetical index to Joel's more than 400 videos. Each link opens a webpage where Joel shares the video together with related articles and links.
- [Freedom](#) - Freedom was WhyQuit's original 1999 stop smoking support group. No longer accepting members, today Freedom's 453,000 archived member posts serve as a valuable source of recovery insight and understanding.



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