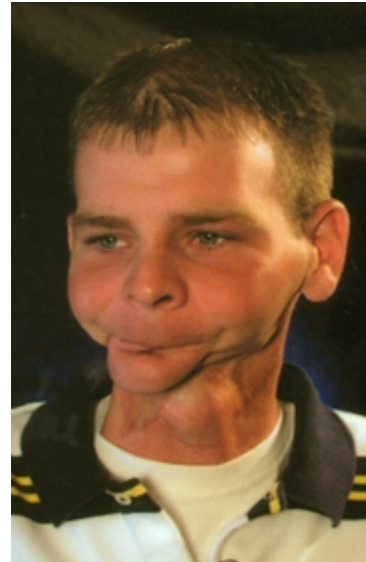


Gruen Von Behrens' Missing Jaw

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 blistering 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 fiancée 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."

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:

- Garret Condon, "State Rips Plan To Label Snuff `Safer' Tobacco", Courant, July 11, 2002
- Picture of Gruen with a student - Illinois Dept. of Health
- Maggie O'Neill, The Record-Courier, January 23, 2004
- Stan Grossfeld, The Boston Globe, July 6, 2004

To learn more about Gruen or arrange for him to speak to your school or group visit the (NSTEP) WebSite

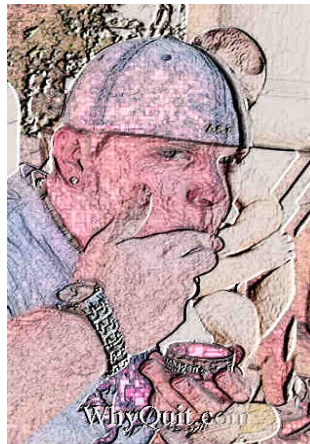
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