

From: Blum, Alan
Sent: Sunday, August 2, 2015 5:16 AM
To: sseidman@mcny.org
Cc: cblackler@mcny.org
Subject: Exhibition idea for "Activist New York"

Sarah Seidman
Curator, "Activist New York"
Museum of the City of New York

Dear Ms. Seidman,

On my most recent visit to the Museum of the City of New York in late-May, Colleen Blackler kindly suggested that I contact you in regard to the possibility of my providing input into the Activist New York exhibition when you next consider introducing new material.

Although I have found much to admire in the exhibition, which I have seen on several occasions, I am disappointed that smoking in public places--a controversial and hotly debated topic but also an important health, environmental, and quality-of-life issue--is not among the activist causes included in the exhibition. It's all the more surprising in light of the internationally recognized efforts to curtail cigarette smoking under the administration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg. With all due respect to the movement for bicycle lanes (which is prominently featured in the exhibition), and in spite of the widespread knowledge of the harmfulness of smoking, cigarettes remain the leading avoidable cause of death and disease, even in New York City.

By way of background, I am a professor of family medicine at the University of Alabama, where I also founded and direct the Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society. Since 1988 I've produced a dozen exhibitions on tobacco-related themes, including "When More Doctors Smoked Camels: A Century of Health Claims in Cigarette Advertising," which debuted at the Texas Medical Center Library in conjunction with the First National Conference on Tobacco Use in America in 1988; "Up in Smoke: The Flight Attendants' Battle for Clean Air Aloft," at the Louis A. Turpen Museum of Aviation at the San Francisco International Airport in 2005 and the Southern Museum of Flight in Birmingham in 2008; "Cartoonists Take Up Smoking," which traveled to eight cities after a year-long run at the National Museum of Health and Medicine in Washington, DC in 2005-6; and "The Surgeon General vs. The Marlboro Man: Who Really Won?" (to mark the 50th anniversary of the Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health), which debuted at the Gorgas Library of the University of Alabama before going on view at the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and two other libraries in 2014. (A few background items are attached in this email and two others.)

I grew up in the Rockaways, and I was personally involved in the early years of anti-smoking activism in New York City in the 1980s. As editor of the New York State Journal of Medicine from 1983 to 1986, I produced the first theme issues of any medical journal devoted to a consideration of the world tobacco pandemic. As chairman of the physicians activist group DOC (Doctors Ought to Care), I enlisted media guru Tony Schwartz (best known as the creator of "The Daisy Spot" for Lyndon Baines Johnson's presidential campaign in 1964) to produce the first paid anti-smoking radio commercials in the US in the mid-1980s. Aired on station WMCA, they were aimed at passage of New York City's first clean indoor air act.

I also worked closely with noted Memorial-Sloan-Kettering chest surgeon Dr. William Cahan, activist Joe Cherner, and a variety of other individuals and organizations to get cigarette advertising off of buses, subways, and sports arenas. Cherner, who organized the effort to get smoking out of schools, restaurants, sports venues, and other public places in the 1990s, donated his meticulously documented archive on smoking in New York City to my Center for the Study of Tobacco and Society. I also photographed cigarette billboards and other signage throughout the City over a 25-year period, undoubtedly the only record of its kind.

So I would like to suggest that consideration be given either to including smoking as a theme in the Activism exhibition or as a freestanding exhibition. Toward this goal, I would be interested in donating what I believe are the most relevant artifacts (and in some instances the only ones), from advertisements and newspaper headlines to ashtrays and promotional displays--as well as assisting in the curation of the exhibition. One such gem is an RJ Reynolds salesman's book that features the same ad for Camel cigarettes in over 100 different languages--intended for the many ethnic

newspapers in New York. At the recent 16th Conference on Tobacco or Health, I gave a presentation entitled, "Defeating Big Tobacco in the Big Apple: How New York City became an international model for tobacco control activism" which I have included here (an audio recording re-synchronized with images and videos):

https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7451b_Fz2D2ZWWhrXzMxYjI6LUU/view?usp=sharing.

I think this will give you an idea of what I would envision for an exhibition. I'm also sending the illustrated key to my exhibition on the Surgeon General's Report, a couple of related articles in medical journals, and a few items related to my other exhibitions..

Naturally, I feel that the subject merits an exhibition in its own right. One could say that Brooke Astor was the City's earliest and foremost anti-smoking advocate, and consequently I'm sure that New York Public Library president Tony Marx (who while president of Amherst College presented me with an honorary doctorate for my anti-smoking activism) and the library's Arents Collection would lend their support. No doubt the Library would be a wonderful venue for such an exhibition (in the space currently occupied by the stunning "Over Here" exhibition on World War I), as would the New York Historical Society, but I think that there might be more creative and engaging possibilities at the Museum of the City of New York.

That's in part due to the fact that this subject is not white as black and white as it might seem. Indeed, part of the reason for the long and difficult journey toward a smoke-free New York was that New York City's cultural institutions were beholden to Philip Morris, which was headquartered in the City (along with other cigarette companies such as Loews) and was the leading corporate sponsor of the arts from the 1960s through the early 2000s. In the 1990s, at the height of activist efforts to curb smoking in New York City and in the US, virtually every major art museum, dance troupe, opera company, and cultural venue in the City was beholden to the maker of Marlboro, the leading cigarette in America and arguably the leading cause of death in America. These included the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Lincoln Center, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, MOMA, the Whitney, El Museo del Barrio, the Jewish Museum, the Studio Museum of Harlem, the New Museum, the Joffrey Ballet Theater, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Company, the Joffrey Ballet, and the New York City Opera. Some of these groups heeded Philip Morris' request to lobby members of the City Council against clean indoor air legislation. The company gave upwards of \$15 million a year to cultural organizations in New York City.

I can provide a list of individuals who would either support such as exhibition or would be potential speakers and panelists for a symposium and any related events at the Museum. I should add that a decade ago I did propose an exhibition on the history of anti-smoking to the neighboring New York Academy of Medicine, but this venue lacked exhibition space and, frankly, reminded me of the Henny Youngman line that the average age of the people in charge was deceased. Dr. Harold Varmus, who I understand has returned to Sloan-Kettering, did express interest in hosting one of my exhibitions at that institution, but he left for Washington to head the National Cancer Institute before the arrangements were finalized. I believe Sloan-Kettering might be interested in co-sponsoring such an exhibition.

I look forward to hearing from you. My next visit to New York is planned for October 12-17, and I would enjoy meeting with you in person to discuss this idea.

Sincerely,

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