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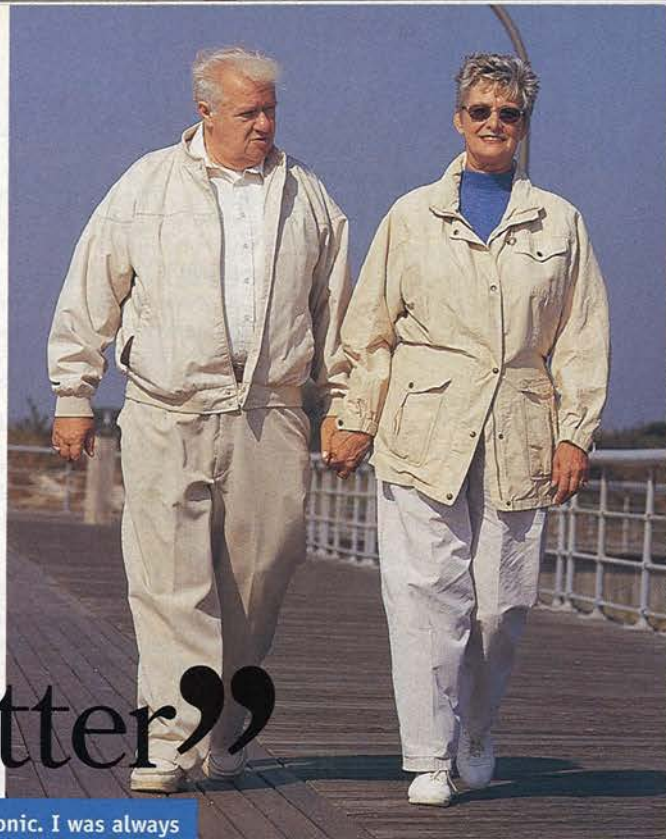
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Profiles in Courage

"I Lost My Voice But Found the Words That Matter"

By Janet Sackman as told to Patricia Crevits



"It's ironic. I was always health conscious," says Janet Sackman, walking with husband, Joe.

they signed me on. I did my first job for the fashion magazine *Harpers Bazaar*. After

Waiting in the auditorium of a northern California high school, I grow nervous as the seats start filling up. I'm here to talk to teenagers about a habit that's disturbingly on the rise among their age group—smoking. I go to the podium on the stage and look out at 1,000 young faces, some yelling across the room to each other. This is going to be a tough audience.

But the instant I open my mouth, the room turns silent. By the time I finish my first sentence, I can hear a pin drop. I'm amazed. It's the robotic rasp of my voice that commands their attention as they listen to my story.

It all started on a summer afternoon at Orchard Beach in the Bronx back in the 40's. I was 15 and went there every Sunday. That day I was approached by a distinguished-looking man who worked for a well-known modeling agency. He gave me his card and told me I had the healthy, outdoor looks that would be right for modeling. So a few days later I took the subway down to the address on the card. Much to my surprise,

that the jobs kept coming. I was on billboards, the cover of *Life*, on TV. People recognized me on the street. It was flattering, to say the least, and so very exciting.

That's how I ended up in a Lucky Strike ad in 1949. I was only 17 and didn't smoke. They dressed me in winter clothes, put me on a fake ski slope holding a cigarette and ski poles. That picture was used in hundreds of ads, posters and billboards, and I became the "Lucky Strike Girl." During the shoot, one of the tobacco executives asked me if I smoked. When I told him 'no,' he said: "You're an up-and-coming model, and you'll probably be doing other cigarette ads and commercials. It would be good if you knew how to hold a cigarette and puff on one."

So I tried it one day. It tasted awful. If someone had told me that the cigarette I was struggling to smoke could one day hurt me, I never would have taken another puff. But that was the "innocent age of tobacco"—everyone smoked, and I was determined to master it to feel grown up and sophisticated. So I tried another. Within the year, I was addicted. A Chesterfield was my constant companion.

My parents didn't object. My father smoked all his life. When I think of him, I see him with a cigarette. He'd wake up and light one before breakfast. It was something I grew up with. I loved my father. I learned everything from this charming Estonian immigrant. When he died at the age of 55 from a heart attack, I was devastated. How could this man I worshiped be taken away so soon? Back then smoking's connection to heart disease wasn't known.

By the time health warnings were stirring, it was the late 1950's. I was married to Joe, my high school sweetheart, retired from modeling and busy raising our four children. I was also smoking a pack and a half a day. My husband smoked three. I vaguely remember



The ad that changed her life: Though she holds a cigarette, the pretty 17-year-old didn't smoke.

Patricia Crevits is a documentary film maker and writer living in New York City.

Photo, Dwight Carter. Cigarette ad courtesy of Janet Sackman.

How We Got Hooked—and Unhooked

1900's

1900's A machine is invented that mass produces cigarettes; pipes begin to lose favor. Cigarettes allow smokers to inhale deeply into their lungs.

When the table talk turns to cigarettes —



1920's

1920's Advertising increases, associating smoking with staying slim.

1930's

1930's 30 percent of movie heroines smoke on screen versus 3 percent of villains, glamorizing the habit. Lung cancer, rare until now, is recognized as a separate disease.

1940's After World War II, smoking becomes acceptable for women; half the population is smoking.

1950's Studies prove that smoking is directly related to lung cancer. Later studies link it to heart disease, other cancers and other illnesses.

1940's

1960's The Government requires that cigarettes carry this warning: CAUTION—CIGARETTE SMOKING MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH.

1950's

1970's Cigarette advertising is banned from radio and television. Airlines offer smoking and nonsmoking sections. In 1976 the Great American Smokeout, which has helped millions quit, begins.

Caution: Cigarette Smoking May Be Hazardous To Your Health

1960's

1980's The American Psychiatric Association declares tobacco addictive. Studies indicate that passive smokers have a higher risk of developing lung cancer than nonsmokers. Many companies, cities and states designate smoke-free areas.

1970's

1980's

No Smoking Please

▶▶▶▶▶▶ From page 39

hearing something on the news about how smoking could hurt you, but nothing about cancer, and nothing that convinced either of us to stop. I swore off it many times, only to light up again and tell myself I'd stop tomorrow, never suspecting how devastating that decision would be.

One of the greatest dangers of smoking is increased risk of cancer, particularly lung cancer, but also cancer of the bladder, mouth, esophagus and throat. When I awoke one morning with an earache, though, that was the farthest thing from my mind, especially since the doctor who examined my ear found nothing wrong. As the pain worsened, I saw doctor after doctor; none of them found anything. But eight months later, as the pain persisted, I was advised to go to an ear and throat specialist, who solemnly explained I had throat cancer. I didn't believe him when he told me that my horrible earaches were a classic symptom. Seeking another opinion, I went to cancer specialists at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Hospital, a short drive from our home on Long Island. They confirmed my worst fear.

Finding renewed hope and a voice

At 51, was I to follow my father? Was this punishment for all those advertisements I did convincing others to smoke? If I vowed never to touch another cigarette again, would God let me live? My mind swirled with these questions and more as I learned that the treatment for laryngeal or throat cancer involves surgery to remove the tumor, followed by radiation. Stages III and IV laryngeal cancer, where the tumor has progressed, usually require removal of the entire voice box. I tried to push this frightening possibility from my mind.

I was operated on within the week. When I woke from the anesthesia, I was cold and asked for a blanket, but no sound came out of my mouth. I was horrified. To save my life, they had taken out my voice box. I sobbed in silence. The only way I could communicate was by writing. It was devastating because I love people and am talkative by nature. Not only my voice but my whole personality was gone. My rage swelled. I felt like putting my fist through a wall.

Instead, I had to learn to cope with the drastic changes that were happening to me. Even breathing would never be the same. With the removal of the voice box, the windpipe is separated from the mouth and food pipe, and brought up to the neck as a stoma, or hole. This nickel-size hole in my throat is how I now breathe. I am no longer able to expel air through my nose or mouth. I can't swim because water would go down my stoma, and I'd surely drown. Because the stoma is essentially my new nose, it is also where mucus builds up. So the first thing I had to learn was how to clean it out, or I would suffocate.

Every day after a laryngectomy is a mental and physical challenge. My throat swelled from the follow-up radiation therapy, making it difficult to swallow. I was also too exhausted to do anything but plop on the couch and stay there. Joe and the children were wonderful about encouraging me on. Nobody could smoke around me, so Joe and the kids—all smokers—quit. Over time, so did all of our neighbors, which helped me snap out of my depression and realize that I may have saved a few lives.

Joe knew that the most important thing for me was to

THE CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
TOBACCO AND SOCIETY

Photos: This page, from top: Culver Pictures, Inc. (1920's and '30s); Joel Kudler/Archive Photos; Archive Photos; Lambert/Archive Photos (X-ray and cigarettes); UP/Corbis Bettman; Reuters/Corbis Bettman. Opposite page, Janet Sackman.

Join Smokeout '98

Be among the 12 million people who will make November 19, 1998—the American Cancer Society's (ACS) 22d annual Great American Smokeout—the first day of a smoke-free life.

The health bonuses:
● By tomorrow: Your

blood pressure will be close to presmoking levels; the amount of carbon monoxide in blood will return to normal; heart-attack risk will be lower.

● In nine months: Circulation improves; lung function will have increased by 30%; coughing, sinus congestion, fatigue and

shortness of breath begin to disappear.

● In one year: Risk of coronary heart disease will be halved; threat of lung cancer will begin to decrease.

To kick the habit, try the following strategies, which are recommended by the ACS. And seek support—having a booster can also help insure your success.

● Make small changes to thwart smoking triggers. For example, if you normally light up just after eating, don't linger at the table. Do something else right away.

● Make a list of activities to do instead of smoking. Ride out a craving by doing one.

● Keep a supply of "mouth toys" such as hard candies, gum and

carrot sticks handy.

● Reward your growing willpower with a treat. If you've tried unsuccessfully to quit in the past, over-the-counter nicotine replacement therapies, such as special gum and patches, can be effective aids, says the ACS.

For more help, call the ACS at 1-800-ACS-2345, or visit their Web site at www.cancer.org.

find a way to talk. He called the American Cancer Society. With training, he was told, some patients can swallow air and create a belching type of speech. They referred him to George Walsh, who had also had a laryngectomy. He would become my teacher and show me that losing one's vocal chords doesn't mean losing one's ability to talk.

It took me six months to learn esophageal speech, and at that, I could burp out only one word—"church." It took another six months before I could manage mechanical-sounding sentences. I was so embarrassed because people stared. I was terrified of opening my mouth in public, so Joe went everywhere with me. He spoke for me and buffered others' reactions. Often they spoke as if I weren't there. Even now, some people speak very loudly to me. I'm not deaf—I just can't speak well.

However, I was really determined to speak again and practiced a lot. Eventually I became so proficient, the American Cancer Society asked me to replace George Walsh when he moved to Florida. In the last 13 years I have taught hundreds of other cancer survivors to talk again. When they first come to me, I see the desperation and depression that I once felt. But I encourage them to be independent and do the things they used to do. "Enjoy life to the fullest," I say. "You are lucky that you still can." And then I remind them that it was only the ability to speak that was lost—and with work, that, too, can be restored.

God was saving me for something

While I tried to be optimistic for others, I lived with the nagging thought of a recurrence. Patients with cancer of the larynx are at risk for developing new cancers, especially within the first two years of treatment. But after seven years, I really thought I was home free. Then a chest X-ray at my six-month checkup indicated that my life was going to be turned upside down again.

A CAT scan confirmed the doctor's worst suspicions: It was lung cancer. I couldn't believe it. A tumor is sneaky. I looked and felt great, but here I was, frightened and in disbelief, back on the operating table. And knowing that lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer death among women (even

over breast cancer), I didn't know if I could beat it this time.

Smokers who are relatively young can reverse some lung damage by quitting, but in older smokers, as I was when I quit, the damage can be irreversible. Yet I count myself lucky. Even though a third of my lung was removed, I'm still here. God is saving me for something.

Exactly what wasn't clear because what little energy and optimism I had went into the next few months of recovery. Only this time I didn't just lie on the couch. My doctor told me that the best way to get my lung power back was to exercise. So I walked, and it made me feel much better.

That was eight years ago. My husband and I still walk every day at Jones Beach, near our home. It's funny how beaches have played a significant part in my life. So, in a way, has advertising. Now it's my turn to work on an antismoking message. Over the past few years, I have appeared in commercials, lobbied legislators to create and pass antismoking bills, spoken at the White House, and worked hard against teenage smoking. Over 3,000 teenagers become hooked on tobacco each day, which is why

I travel to high schools all over the world, holding up my old cigarette advertisements and telling my story. "You were given a strong and healthy body—take care of it," I tell them. "If you smoke, it's not going to hurt anybody else, just you—and it will catch up with you."

Not long ago, I saw three young girls smoking at a bus stop. I went over to them and told them what had happened to me. Maybe they thought I was crazy. But I receive letters all the time from children saying that after hearing me speak, they decided not to smoke anymore. That's what makes it worthwhile. I hope I can help change the dreadful statistics because over 400,000 Americans die from smoking each year. It's ironic that when I had one, I wasn't using my voice to make a difference, and now I'm grateful to be alive and doing some good. ■



The former cigarette model now speaks out about the habit that almost killed her.

FC Connection NEW The Great American Smokeout

Get involved this November 19th and find out how to keep your kids from smoking. Call 1-888-239-3819 and try our service for free, or see page 124.