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WEDNESDAY  
JULY 27, 1994KIDS SMOKING?  
GROSS 'EM OUT  
New anti-smoking ideas/C

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## LIVING

FEATURES • ADVICE • ENTERTAINMENT • TV • COMICS

Entertainment

■ PBS's chief set sparks flying with his plans for dramatic programming. /3C



DONNA BRITT

The whole truth,  
so help us, God:  
And then what?

**A**N HOUR after I saw "True Lies," the Arnold Schwarzenegger hit about a woman stunned to discover that her dull salesman husband is actually an international spy and explosives expert, a friend called to drop his own bombshell:

"Did you know that your ex-boyfriend is bisexual?"

I did know that "Bill," whom I'd dated for several months in college, never married. I remember his challenging intellect, macho swagger and booming laugh, and that he moved from the Midwest to a large Northeastern city.

Bill is still living there, said my pal — with his boyfriend.

I hope they're happy. But I won't pretend that learning about his sexual orientation wasn't a bit startling, especially after the movie. I mean, there just wasn't a clue.

It's like hearing that the nerdiest guy in your high school class just married Janet Jackson, or being the dumbfounded neighbor of a convicted killer and insisting, "But he was the nicest guy."

Whom, really, do we know?

The woman we lunch with daily at work? Our oldest friend? Our lover, siblings, spouse?

Ourselves?

If it were multiple-choice, I'd check "none of the above."

**S**TILL, I thought about Bill for a long time after I hung up. This man's chief appeal was his openness — his frankness about his heart's inner workings. Sleeping with other men never came up.

Of course not. One of my most embarrassing memories is of having dinner with a younger male friend during grad school, a guy whose many visits made me sure he had a crush on me. Playing the tease, I leaned over and cooed, "What would your parents say if they knew you were gay?"

His face went so gray that the only life in it was two moist, terrified eyes. In despair, he croaked:

"How did you know?"

I didn't. But to have so cruelly and casually exposed such pain was mortifying. It flowed out of him growing up feeling disconnected; yearning to be drawn to girls; wondering whether his attraction grew out of his father's inability to hug him. "I've never told this to anyone," he said. Of all the sad things he told me, that was saddest.

But was it really sadder than the other myriad drops in the bitter ocean of secrets we swim in?

Psychologists say we are only as sick as our secrets. But secrets are like navel — we all have them, and for good reason. If we all came clean, a million marriages, not to mention soap opera plots, would disintegrate.

**S**o now I'm wondering about Bill. If he knew then that he was bisexual, did he wish to share his hidden self? How would I have reacted if he had? Does what he couldn't reveal make suspect what he could — his quirky humor, his outrage at injustice, the vagrant charm? I believe they were as true as any lie he may have lived.

I can't judge Bill. But I deplore lies because they seem to strip you of power. You just don't know what you're dealing with. Which is life, but is untenable.

At the end of the wondrous movie "A River Runs Through It," the elderly narrator admits he was confounded by

# Don't be a Butt-head

*Can gross jokes and video games turn kids off to cigarettes? A number of stop-smoking advocates are counting on it*

BY ALAN GATHRIGHT  
Mercury News Staff Writer



Rex Ronan is here to make the world safe for breathing, and teach kids a thing or two about smoking's dangers.

**E**DUARDO Valencia is in the video-game hot seat — stuck between emphysema, slime and the killer Microbots.

Other kids shout advice — "Shoot 'em!" or "Duck!" — as Eduardo tries to save Jake Westboro, a tobacco executive with lung cancer, and micro-surgeon

Rex Ronan, who is battling inside Jake's gunky lungs.

Eduardo is only 8, but he wields the "laser scalpel" like an ace surgeon. He thumbs the Nintendo keypad and Rex spins, spraying the laser rays to wipe out emphysema blotches and the micro-sized robots — Microbots — dispatched by the evil tobacco companies.

"Yes!" Eduardo says to himself in triumph.

Eduardo is one of a dozen kids gathered at Plugged In, an East Palo Alto computer learning center, to test "Rex Ronan — Experimental Surgeon," a new video created by Raya Systems of Mountain View and designed by the same people who made the gory Mortal Kombat.

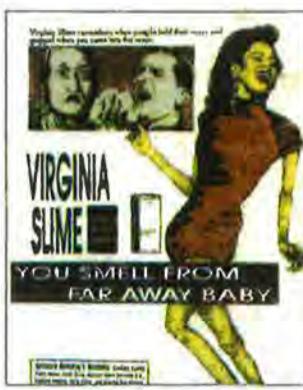
But Dr. Rex is engaged in real-life mortal combat: teaching millions of young video players the hazards of smoking in a way that's not only fun, but kid-friendly enough that the lessons will sink in.

"It was dangerous," Eduardo says of the video game. "His lungs were all dirty and smoky and I needed to clean them out so he could breath better."

Rex Ronan is the latest weapon in an innovative arsenal that tobacco foes are aiming at a deadly habit that hooks 3,000 children every day — most between ages 11 and 15, according to the National Institute of Drug Abuse. Along with Rex Ronan, health advocates are trying everything from kids' trading cards that trash tobacco brands with potty humor to an interactive video soap-opera in which the hero is torn between the sweetheart, who smokes, and her sister, who doesn't.

It also is an acknowledgment that the traditional finger-wagging approach — "It's bad for you!" — has its limits with kids, and that a better strategy might be to reach youngsters with kid-appealing slang, technology and gross-out gags.

A video game was a logical starting point, given



Trading cards that mock cigarette brands use a new weapon in the war against tobacco: humor.

## Health &amp; fitness

■ On-the-job stress for moms. Page C

■ Pill for yeast infections. Page C

See SMOKING, Page 7C

