

Mother Jones

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MoJo's September Hellraiser

Name: Ira Sharenow

What He Does: Anti-tobacco activist

CLAIM TO FAME: Banned restaurant smoking in Madison, Wis.

Ira Sharenow rarely misses a city council meeting. Nicknamed the “21st alder” on Madison’s 20-seat council, the anti-tobacco activist serves his city in the self-appointed role of gadfly.

Sharenow spends up to 40 hours a week gathering information about the tobacco industry and its politics for journalists, legislators, and other activists. His diligence has paid off: In 1991, Sharenow successfully organized a smoking ban at the University of Wisconsin, where he is a graduate student; a year later, he was instrumental in getting a smoking ban in restaurants citywide.

“He’s the leading activist in the state of Wisconsin,” says Scott Brezinski, an intern pharmacist and former fellow student.

Not afraid to confront those in power, Sharenow meticulously documents tobacco industry contributions to Wisconsin politicians. He’s asked Gov. Tommy Thompson about tobacco ties at press conferences and on radio call-in shows. In 1993, Sharenow brought an ethics charge against a prominent Madison lobbyist for not disclosing that Philip Morris paid him to lobby against the restaurant smoking ban. (The ethics charge failed because Madison doesn’t require lobbyists to say who pays them.) Another tobacco lobbyist called

Sharenow “dangerous and evil” after Sharenow claimed the lobbyist was worse than a mafia attorney for taking tobacco money.

Sharenow’s activism is so relentless that even some tobacco control groups are leery of him. One official at the American Heart Association once told Sharenow he caused more harm to the anti-tobacco movement than Philip Morris, because he won’t compromise. “He doesn’t give up,” agrees Sharenow supporter Jean MacCubbin, a Madison City Council alder.

Sharenow, who is allergic to smoke, became active because the head of his math department allowed smoking in the building. He took the fight all the way up to then-chancellor Donna Shalala, and won. Ever since, Sharenow has devoted himself to attending council meetings, pressuring politicians, and writing letters to the editor.

“Even when I’m doing the dishes,” Sharenow says, “I’m thinking about who to write letters to.”