

OPINION / Bill Lueders

The most hated person in tobacco control

Why is Ira Sharenow shunned by people who get paid to do what he does better?

Ira Sharenow takes a lot of knocks. Mayor Paul Soglin has compared him to Joe McCarthy. Ald. Sue Bauman publicly admonished him to "get a life." *Madison Magazine*, in naming Sharenow one of the city's 25 most influential people, called him "Madison's most notorious anti-smoking zealot." And Badger Liquor, 402 State St., put an ad in its window hawking 101-proof "Buckshot Wild West Liquor" [sic]: "It definitely helps me feel better, along with the realization that things could be worse—I could have turned out like *Ira Sharenow*..." Har har.

But if you really want to find people who hate Ira Sharenow—who deep down despise him—talk to the people who get paid to do something about smoking.

Last week, I called Bill McCracken, executive vice president of the American Cancer Society's Wisconsin Division, to ask about Sharenow. Betsy Zera, the group's PR flak, called back with an acid "No comment." What about Sharenow's success in helping ban smoking at the UW-Madison, the City-County Building and Madison restaurants, and his work on youth-access enforcement, all issues on which the state Cancer Society (1994 budget: \$7.7 million), has been a virtual nonplayer? "No comment."

"I'm the most hated person in tobacco control," asserts Sharenow. "I'm an activist. I speak out. What I do leads to change."

Sharenow says Rich Yoast, director of Project ASSIST, a federally funded anti-tobacco program run by the state (1995 budget: \$1.5 million), "once told me to grow up and get a job." (Yoast, who calls Sharenow "one of the most effective activists in the nation," defends his group's decision not to support Sharenow's work: "We don't fund individuals.") Dr. Pat Remington, the state's chief medical officer, purportedly urged Sharenow to sell blood plasma for funds.

"Why is it Ira Sharenow all the time?" asks Sharenow. "It's Ira Sharenow, Ira Sharenow, Ira Sharenow, because there's no one else. You have to ask: Why is there no one else?"

Since becoming an anti-tobacco activist in 1990, Sharenow has put in thousands of hours of work. He has received no funding from any quarter, and pays for all costs out of pocket. "I work at minus \$1 an hour," he says. "It's worse than slavery."

In recent months, Sharenow has curtailed his activism because he just can't afford it. "In order to continue, I need some funding."

Sharenow's appeals for help have been spurned by the American Cancer Society, American Lung Association, and American Heart Association. All three, he notes, are primarily "fund-raising organizations, not advocacy groups." (Gov. Tommy Thompson has helped raise money for the American Cancer Society; is it any wonder the group didn't speak out when Thompson vetoed a proposed ban on smoking in the new Brewers stadium on grounds that Miller Brewing, a subsidiary of Philip Morris, objected?) At times, says Sharenow, these groups have worked with tobacco-industry lobbyists to pass legislation sought by cigarette companies.

In contrast to Sharenow, Yoast makes \$60,083 a year to run Project ASSIST, which has a \$6.5 million, eight-year federal grant

and a stated goal of reducing teen smoking in Wisconsin by more than 40%. In fact, studies show that teen smoking in Wisconsin and Dane County, which has a Project ASSIST-funded program called Tobacco-Free Dane County, is on the rise.

"They've clearly failed at what they said they would do, despite the millions of dollars they spend on meetings with each other," says Sharenow. ("It's a tough battle," responds Yoast, who attributes the increase to the tobacco industry's efforts to encourage teens to smoke.)

John Chapin, interim director of the state Division of Health, has suggested creating a state-funded research project through the UW-Madison for which Sharenow could apply. Still, he says, "If Ira Sharenow doesn't get hired to do this research, it's okay with me."

That's the limit of the bureaucratic mind: Maybe we can fund more research. Mean-



MARY LANGENFELD

"Why is it Ira Sharenow all the time?"

while, the most important work in tobacco control—the kind of advocacy that leads to change—is being done by Ira Sharenow.

In nearly 10 years at *Isthmus*, I have never once received a press release, phone call or fax from the American Cancer Society, the American Lung and Heart associations, the Wisconsin Division of Health or any agency funded by Project ASSIST seeking coverage on or editorial support for any measure that would make it more difficult for smokers to light up in public or for kids to buy cigarettes. Yet it's these things—not innocuous, showy events like this week's "Great American Smoke Out"—that represent the true front line in the war against smoking.

Meanwhile, Sharenow sends me—and other journalists and policy makers—several communications a week: raising issues, picking battles, providing information. He's not the only person doing work in this area—Yoast makes a good point when he says smoking is a societal issue that requires a multifaceted response—but he's certainly more visible, more courageous, and more effective than a lot of people who do get funding.

Sharenow urges those who support his work—who appreciate that the UW-Madison campus, the City-County Building and city restaurants are no longer stinking carcinogenic dens—to put their money where their smoke-free mouths are: "People who care about smoking and health should fund individual activists and not the American Cancer Society. Write your check out to Ira Sharenow." He's in the phone book. ■

Bill Lueders is news editor of *Isthmus*.

ISTHMUS

Madison's alt-weekly
since 1976