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Columns

EDUCATION MATTERS: Ban objectors are blowing smoke

By DAN KIMBER

I have noted with great interest the community input on the proposed smoking ordinance. It raises a number of issues and, judging from the letters to this newspaper, has people pretty worked up on both sides.

The objections to the ordinance, if I understand them, seem to center around smokers claiming an infringement on their rights and being increasingly marginalized in a society that used to show far greater tolerance to their habit. The proponents of the ordinance maintain that smokers infringe on others' rights by polluting the air and affecting the health of people around them.

Allow me a brief point/counterpoint on this issue. My prejudice is transparent, but I welcome voices on either side to point out what I have left out. I would add that I am an ex-smoker and that on that basis claim to understand something about the addiction to tobacco. Now, however, as a nonsmoker, I understand the objections of so many who endure the foul air that smokers create whenever and wherever they light up. (Is my prejudice showing yet?)

First of all, I would challenge any smoker to deny an element of self-loathing that attends his/her habit. By that I mean that virtually everyone who picks up the habit and continues smoking at some point realizes that they have made a conscious decision to cut short their time on this earth. They have signaled to their family and all who love them that their private indulgence takes priority over all else. Dragging smoke into their lungs at regular intervals is a satisfaction more rewarding than seeing a son or daughter starting their own families, or feeling the pure joy of holding a grandchild and being part of that child's life. They must additionally, and inevitably, contend with the sobering statistic that smoking-related death is the most preventable cause of death of all.

"But," a smoker will assert, "smoking doesn't necessarily shorten a life span. Just look at Uncle _____, who lived to a ripe old age and smoked like a chimney for 50 years. And just why should smoking be singled out for special consideration when there are other bad habits that we humans have that also contribute to bad health?"

It's hard to argue with the "logic" of an addict, who has learned to support his habit with convenient rationales, which are really nothing more than self-delusion. If the selfishness of the habit doesn't resonate (as in, "Sorry family, I chose this disgusting habit over being with you for a longer time"), then perhaps the harm the habit causes to others will.

Nonsmokers who must endure smokers are victims who unfortunately, involuntarily and secondarily, are affected by the regular presence of smoke in their lives.

It taxes neither the brain nor the heart to see the reason and good sense of further restricting smoking in our city. At the very least there should be a recognition of people who suffer from

asthma or allergies or an acute sensitivity to smoke — all of whom feel assaulted when people around them puff away in their presence.

Secondhand smoke exposure causes as many as 300,000 children in the United States to suffer from respiratory tract infections.

The mere possibility of the truth — or even the half truth — of these statistics should make all tobacco addicts who, when they smoke, voluntarily remove themselves from every other creature in the vicinity looking to draw an even breath.

And just to repeat, I too was once a regular pack-a-day, and I must add, obnoxious smoker. I lit up in rooms, in cars, in theaters — in so many places that inflicted my habit on other people's lungs. My addiction, even if it bothered other people, came first. And that, I have concluded, is the nature of all addictions: To hell with anyone else because my immediate pleasure outweighs your displeasure.

I stopped smoking 30 years ago for two reasons. I watched my father (two packs a day for 40 years) gasping for breath in the final months of his life, and I was soon to be a father myself and did not want my child to be affected by my disgusting, self-destructive habit.

My support of this ordinance has less to do with adults being bothered by secondhand smoke and more to do with our children who watch and learn from their elders. To a child just coming of age, the prospect of lighting up a cigarette has a great attraction, thanks to the cigarette companies who spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year to entice young people into the habit, and thanks to adult role models (no shortage of them here in Glendale) who willingly cooperate in that venture by their example.

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