

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 3: Role Modeling and No Menthol Sunday

May 15, 2020

Summary: Sunday, May 17, is No Menthol Sunday, a day for churches in the African American community to shine a light on the insidious nature of menthol and targeted tobacco advertising. Dr. Adam Alexander of the OU Health Sciences Center shares the latest research on the appeal and dangers of menthol, and Theodore Noel of Guiding Right shares the influential work of the organization and the importance of community outreach. Then firefighter and former smoker Shaun Pryor shares his experience with the tobacco helpline and the power of positive role modeling.

[Theme music]

[0:15]

- James Tyree: Hello and welcome to the TSET Better Health Podcast! This is James Tyree, health communication consultant here at TSET, and I'm here with Cate Howell of TSET health communication. Cate, how are you doing today?
- Cate Howell: I am doing much better now that the spring 2020 semester is over. How are you doing, James?
- JT: Doing pretty well too. It's been a busy stretch, but hanging in there and feeling pretty good. So congratulations on surviving this semester. I know you worked hard for it, that's for sure.
- CH: Thanks, I was really lucky. I had lots of resources and lots of cool professors. I think I did okay, but dang, it was really hard. [laughs]
- JT: I hear you. Well, you survived, so way to go, way to go. And you know, on top of everything else, on top of work, on top of school, on top of regular stuff that we deal with, there's also the pandemic going on, COVID-19, sheltering in place, that has really upended things as well, you know?
- CH: Yeah, it's at the forefront of everyone's minds on top of everything else that's going on.
- JT: Exactly. Well, here at TSET, we are cognizant of that. People are at home a lot more, their kids are home, they've been doing school at home, work at home, things like that, and I wanted to tell people about new resources on Shape Your Future called [COVID-19 Healthy Tools](https://shapeyourfutureok.com). You go to shapeyourfutureok.com, and it's easy to find. And it has a number of great resources that offer healthy meal planning, but the meals are tasty and delicious so the kids will also like them; how to stay physically active while sheltering in place; it has downloadable activities for kids; there are a lot of really great stuff in terms of nutrition and physical activity during this time that is so, so different. So again, go to shapeyourfutureok.com. Check it out, Cate, I think you'll like it too. I am too, I'm definitely going to use a couple of those recipes.

CH: It's definitely been hard staying motivated and finding creative ways to keep active, keep physically active while at home. So I really like that they have all these cool things you can do just solo, from a safe distance.

There's been a lot of misinformation about tobacco use and COVID-19. There have been some - just lots of confusion. There's been some conflicting studies. But just recently, either today or yesterday, actually I believe it was yesterday, the WHO, World Health Organization, released a [statement](#) definitively saying that, quote, "a review of studies by public health experts convened by the WHO on April 29 found that smokers are more likely to develop severe disease with COVID-19 compared to nonsmokers." So we have an official ruling on that. And another group of universities and institutions came out just recently too saying that they found that tobacco use [increases entry points](#) in the lungs for COVID-19. So, the consensus is in: tobacco use is bad, it's always been bad, it always will be bad, especially for your lungs, so now is the best time to quit smoking.

JT: Yeah, it's just another good reason, and it makes sense because that virus totally attacks your respiratory system, as does tobacco use, so it just compounds the danger there. So I'm glad that you shared that with us.

You know, coming up here will be an annual observance day known as [No Menthol Sunday](#). It happens in May of every year. This year, it'll fall on May 17th, and this is a day that was organized and is led each year by the National African American Tobacco Prevention Network. What it does is it provides a great opportunity for faith leaders to talk with their congregation members about preventing and using — or quit using — menthol flavored tobacco products in general. As we just mentioned, tobacco products are harmful no matter what kind you're talking about, but menthol has been particularly insidious, especially because they ensnare a higher percentage of younger people and African Americans.

And on that, we will hear from [Dr. Adam Alexander](#). He is a postdoctoral researcher at the OU Health Sciences Center. His current research interests include tobacco prevention and cessation, health disparities, and trauma and tobacco use. And we'll also hear from Theodore Noel who is the executive director of the Oklahoma City-based nonprofit [Guiding Right](#). He will speak on the fight against tobacco in the African American community in particular and the power of role modeling that affects us all.

CH: Our third guest today is [Shaun Pryor](#) who is an Edmond firefighter, and he has been in the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline commercials. He's also just kind of become a community activist, and he tells his story about how he was a longtime tobacco user, and as you said James, you know, talking about role modeling, he talks about his role models and how he intends to be a good role model to his children and to the kids he talks to at school, to the other firefighters that he knows, and it's just a really great conversation. So we have some really great guests today. I'm excited.

JT: You know, I've seen his commercials on TV quite a bit, and he seems like such a cool guy, just a great guy to hang out with. What was it like talking with him?

CH: He's so chill. Really down to earth and - it was nice to hear his story, you know? And just his personal perspective on things, and he's had a very interesting life, so you'll see. We'll see.

JT: Okay. I look forward to hearing it. And as will our listening audience. That's for sure.

Well, I did get to speak with Dr. Adam Alexander and with Theo Noel. First we'll talk a bit more about No Menthol Sunday, which as I mentioned will be on May 17th this year. And it's a very important day because menthol cigarettes in particular have appeal to younger smokers, African Americans as well because of the smooth flavoring that makes it easier to smoke, but also menthol tobacco products and other flavored products have been marketed to these groups as well, which the tobacco industry is known for doing. But I had a great conversation about this with Dr. Alexander, and let's listen to it now.

[07:46]

JT: Hello, we are here today with Dr. Adam Alexander, a postdoctoral research fellow at the Stephenson Cancer Center's Oklahoma Tobacco Research Center at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center. Welcome, and it's very nice having you here, Dr. Alexander.

Adam Alexander: Thank you for having me on your podcast.

JT: Wanted to ask you about the nature of your research. What is it that you are studying, and what motivated you to go in this direction?

AA: So, as you stated, I'm a postdoctoral research fellow at the Oklahoma Tobacco Research Center, and there I worked with Dr. Kendzor, who is an expert in smoking cessation, especially with the vulnerable populations such as socioeconomically disadvantaged adults, and when I came here, I wanted to continue in that work, but I also developed a focus on African Americans and addressing smoking cessation among African Americans because there's a lot of research out there that shows that African Americans are less likely to quit. So when I came to the Oklahoma Tobacco Research Center, I wanted to explore factors that serve as either barriers or facilitators of smoking cessation, and I've been doing that for two years now.

JT: Well, with this podcast, we will be speaking on menthol, and we'll also speak on role modeling. I wanted to ask you, Dr. Alexander, about menthol, which is, as you know, particularly popular among tobacco users who are young and among African Americans. And just in your research, what you have learned, what is it about menthol tobacco that makes it so particularly dangerous or even insidious?

AA: Okay, that's a great point, great point. So, yes, you're right, it's very, very common. Menthol use is very common among African Americans. Among 80% of all African Americans use menthol cigarettes as their primary brand or type of cigarette they prefer to smoke. And when you look at menthol, menthol acts as a flavor. It provides cigarettes with a minty flavor. Now, why is that? Well, especially when you look at youth, nicotine and tobacco itself is not a very tasty product. And so what menthol does is it masks that

very harsh and unpleasant taste. And so when you see a youth or an African American young man smoke a menthol cigarette, they're usually smoking it just to mask that poor taste of a regular tobacco cigarette, and what you find is that, especially when you look at youth, that African Americans are specifically sensitive to that bitter taste of tobacco, and when you use menthol, well, you no longer have to deal with that bitter taste. And so that's also why you see a lot of flavors, or all flavors being banned for youth, because tobacco companies know that if we can mask that smell or that taste of tobacco, then we can hook a young population to nicotine.

JT: Right. Is it even more dangerous because of that flavoring? Do people take in bigger puffs with it or anything along those lines?

AA: You're exactly - you're onto something right there. That's an important point also as well. Not only is it taste, but menthol also has a soothing property - it has a soothing effect on the body. So tobacco, when you smoke it, especially when you smoke tobacco, you're irritating your lungs, you're irritating a lot of your organs within the body, and so what menthol does is it kind of soothes those organs, so it is possible that you could be taking in more of the horrible toxicants when you're smoking a menthol cigarette, which could actually increase your risk of suffering from some tobacco-related illness down the road. So yes, it potentially could be more dangerous. It could also explain why you see so many African Americans suffering disproportionately from certain tobacco-related illnesses such as lung cancer, stroke and other diseases.

JT: Yeah, very important point. Well, in mid-May of each year, there is an event called No Menthol Sunday that a lot of faith communities take part in, and there are other menthol events that take place to draw attention to this particular product and what harm it does. You spoke to the danger just a couple of minutes ago, but what can you say about such an important event such as No Menthol Sunday?

AA: Oh, I think it's a very important day. Because we really need to understand as a community, and I think the public needs to understand in general, that menthol cigarettes are a different beast than just conventional cigarettes that just contain tobacco. Because it's really masking the dangers, I think, of smoking. I think when people smoke menthol cigarettes, they're not really capturing the degree of the damage they're really doing to their body because the menthol, that minty, peppermint taste, is hiding those dangers. And I think we need the public to understand that you're at the same risk or possibly even greater risk of poor health outcomes when you smoke menthol cigarettes, so I definitely think we need days like No Menthol Sunday, especially when it involves the faith community, because I think the faith community has played a very positive role in our battles to combat the tobacco epidemic.

JT: Do you see momentum taking place in which menthol flavoring might actually be banned along with other flavors?

AA: So, there is a flavor ban in effect, but I think menthol avoided being part of that ban in this round of regulation. I do think a ban is coming down the road. I think that - I wouldn't say it's inevitable, but I think it's something that's very likely in our future. I

think that there's a lot of public health momentum behind that initiative, and I think in the future we will see a menthol ban for all tobacco products.

JT: That would be fantastic. That would be fantastic for sure. Okay, and finally, Dr. Alexander, most everyone knows that tobacco is harmful, that it's very addictive, but it is by its very nature very hard to quit, and so I wanted to ask you, based on things that you have learned, what you have studied, anything in particular that you want people to understand going forward that can perhaps help them to quit or the benefits of living a tobacco-free life?

AA: That's the first thing I always say when I try to bring hope to people is to tell them that if you're smoking, no matter the age, if you stop smoking now, you have the opportunity to live a longer and healthier life. There are many free services available to you. If you're living in Oklahoma, especially in Oklahoma City, you can access the Tobacco Treatment Research Program, which is free and available to the public. If you have a phone, you can access the quitline. And these are all great services that'll help you become smoke free.

Now, what I do in my research is a lot of times we focus on evidence-based treatment, and evidence-based treatments are great, but they have a broad appeal to a wide variety of people, and we're realizing I think, slowly but surely, especially as the prevalence of smoking goes down, that there's certain subgroups in America and in Oklahoma that need additional resources and help to quit smoking. And the group I focus on because it's the group that's closest to me are African Americans. I think that African Americans face certain things more so than other communities such as discrimination that needs to be addressed in intervention, and right now, we're not designing behavioral interventions for smoking cessation to treat discrimination and other culturally relevant factors that influence smoking, because the research is pretty clear from what I read that if you're a victim of discrimination or some significant stressor, you respond to that incident by engaging in poor health behaviors, including smoking. And so if we really want to, you know, tackle menthol use and just smoking in African Americans and other communities, we really have to start looking at those cultural risk factors that influence vulnerable populations.

JT: Okay, alright. Thank you for your time, Dr. Alexander.

AA: Thank you for having me.

[16:29]

JT: Alright! It was so good to hear from Dr. Alexander there. He had some very very good points about what he has found, what he has learned in his research, not only menthol cigarettes but also health disparities regarding tobacco and other things. Very very interesting comments.

CH: Yeah, it reminds me of one of our first guests that we had on for our first episode, Dr. Amy Cohn. She also talked about the insidious use of flavored tobacco. But I also really appreciate, you know, what he was saying about No Menthol Sunday and when we look

at the church community and our church leaders and talk about role modeling, you know, these are influential people in our communities.

So I'm happy and excited to introduce our next guest, Theodore Noel of Guiding Right, talking about tobacco use in the community level and how the faith community is such an influential role model in our communities and what they're doing to combat tobacco use, particularly in African American communities, which are disproportionately targeted by tobacco advertising and, frankly, preventable deaths. So let's hear what he has to say about No Menthol Sunday.

[17:51]

JT: Okay, we are here today with Theo Noel, the executive director of Guiding Right in Oklahoma City. Theo, welcome to the TSET Better Health podcast.

Theodore Noel: Absolutely, thank you and good morning, James.

JT: Thank you. Hey, can you please briefly share with us the work of Guiding Right?

TN: Sure. Fantastic. Any time I have an opportunity to talk about the work and scope of Guiding Right, I will always make myself available.

So we have an over 20-year track record of providing public health services, particularly in Oklahoma City, and primarily focusing on the African American community. So what we like to say we have what we call three flagship programs.

One is a [comprehensive prevention program](#) in which we provide confidential HIV counseling and testing, case management for individuals who are high risk for HIV, and also case management for individuals that are actually living with HIV or AIDS. We also have community outreach where we go out into the community and try to provide information about HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. So we're regularly at college universities, local high schools and even local middle schools talking about HIV and other STI's. We're trying to bring it more so in the forefront and just look at HIV as a chronic disease instead of the death sentence like it was, oh, you know, 30, 40 years ago.

The second flagship program is our [Women Infant and Children](#), and that stands for WIC, and it's a nutrition education program for moms and their babies up to the age of 5. So there's a lot of prenatal care that goes into that as well, so making sure that mom will have optimal pregnancy and delivery and provide nutritious foods for her, for their children up to the age of 5.

And the third flagship program is our tobacco prevention program, and it's under the acronym [M-POWER](#), and within that we really work with the African American community and to get those entities, usually businesses, churches, beauty salons, barber shops, to adopt a tobacco-free policy. Within the last couple years, we really put in there kind of a total health policy where it's talking about obviously no tobacco, but also physical fitness and nutrition.

JT: Oh, very good, excellent. So at one point along the way did tobacco policies, tobacco prevention and programs become—

TN: Sure—

JT: —one of Guiding Right's health priorities?

TN: Yeah. Excellent question. About eight years into our tenure, well, probably about seven years into our tenure, we started seeing trends of heavy tobacco use among pretty much African American young gay males. And some focus groups we met with, key informants, gatekeepers, and basically the results were they were using it as a coping mechanism. So, and then just general population, just even — you would be amazed, at that time, the high percentage of moms actually pregnant and were smoking. And we're like, oh my gosh, so there's something that we have to do to address this. And so years into it, we're like, okay, we have to come up with a remedy, at least for something that as an organization that we can do to bring credence to this and to talk about prevention and total elimination.

JT: Wanted to ask you, you know, Guiding Right and TSET, we have worked together on ads and articles that expose the ways that tobacco companies try to entice African Americans to use their products. What have you seen here in Oklahoma in that regard, and how does Guiding Right and others educate people on what's actually going on?

TN: Sure, sure. Like you said, James, TSET and Guiding Right has definitely done some great collaborative work, really relying on the expertise of you guys, but hip hop industry and just hip hop in general as a culture is really heavy among African Americans, and so what I see with tobacco and large tobacco companies is really like a laser focus, is really strategically targeting the hip hop generation by using, at one point when Koolhaas was real popular, they would have hip hop summits and concerts sponsored by Koolhaas, and they really tried to play on words, the K-O-O-L, which is cool. I mean, it's the reason why they spend over a million dollars a day just on marketing and advertising. So it's definitely had its negative impact on African American community, and other poor and marginalized communities of color, but really the biggest thing that we've seen is really how tobacco companies has used hip hop, just because hip hop now — over 40-50 years, so it really affects a large segment of the population.

JT: Hm. I see. Now, we're doing this podcast this month because No Menthol Sunday, which is a national faith-based effort to draw attention to the harm of menthol, is coming up in mid-May on May 17th, and I wanted to ask, to your knowledge, what effect has this had here on people in Oklahoma?

TN: Well, this No Menthol Sunday scheduled for May 17th is obviously, in the age of COVID-19, is gonna be somewhat a little different as far as the gathering of actual folks with, you know, sitting in the pews. So we're definitely gonna have to be a little creative, more so than we have in the past, in using opportunities like this one, and other social media and different outlets to get the word out about No Menthol Sunday.

I'm a member of the Church of Living God, so in being a champion of no menthol and tobacco free totally, in our church you have a policy, we've always set aside that Sunday that was totally focused on the no menthol, whatever that theme was, happened to have been in that particular year. Like for the theme in 2020 is Awaken. So our pastor was really on board with this, and he would bring a message talking about overall health, and then after his message, I would get up and just read off some statistics about tobacco, in particular how menthol is so easy to the palate, so it's highly addictive but even more difficult to get off. So those are some of the things we've done locally. In the Oklahoma City area, we've worked with you guys in developing strategies and developing, you know, some social media. Social media is so impactful. What you see, you can be influenced by.

JT: Yes.

TN: So in making, you know, really pushing no menthol, it's like a lot of kids that's smoking, they don't even know what menthol is. They just know they like it. They like the feel of the taste when they're inhaling, but have no idea what menthol actually is. So once you explain that and, like, you really need to be aware of what you're smoking and what you're putting in your body. So and I think that's one of the biggest takeaways of No Menthol Sunday. Some of those things are exposed. In the African American community as well as other communities of color, faith is very important to us. And the cool thing about No Menthol Sunday is it not only deals with Christianity, there are some things about Islam, in the Jewish community, Catholicism, so there's different faiths layered into No Menthol Sunday so it's just not totally focused on Christianity, although Christianity is the major religion in North America of course, but the cool thing is it deals with other religions and the importance of a good, clean body, being in optimal health as much as possible. Definitely don't do any things, putting in your body that can cause harm to yourself or harm to others.

JT: Absolutely, yeah. Very very good points. And you mentioned social media, so this is wonderful not only for No Menthol Sunday, but also you can do this type of messaging any time of year as well, so hopefully people will get that message. Well finally, your agency is about community, and role modeling is, of course, a major aspect of community. Not just about kids looking up to adults, although that is a humongous part of it—

TN: Sure.

JT: —but also how media and culture influence the standards of everyone of all ages. So how does role modeling fit into the things that you say and do in your tobacco prevention services?

TN: Being a former athlete, I really don't like what a lot of professional athletes used to say, "I don't want to be viewed as a role model." Sometimes you don't have a say-so in that just because your stature, and for me, my dad was my role model. So being a father and a husband myself, and being a gatekeeper or an ambassador of good health and outcomes in the African American community, I want to ensure that I am doing, as an individual, everything that I possibly can on a daily basis to exhibit leadership skills to

make sure that I'm in optimal health. You're not gonna find a picture of me with a cigar in my hand after my daughter was born even though that was the cool thing to do, you know, you hand out cigars because you have a child and all. You know, you're not gonna find me doing that. So role modeling is part and parcel to all of the programs that we have. In the field of public health, again, we are viewed as the so-called health professionals, so if you are doing something that's going to have a negative impact, you just never know who's watching you. In public health, even when you're off the clock, you're on the clock because it's 24 hours a day and seven days a week. So...

JT: So true.

TN: Needless to say, somebody is always — someone is always watching you.

JT: [laughs]

TN: And, like I said, growing up, you know, my father was my role model, so I like to take some of those same attributes being a father myself and a husband, you know, I don't want my 12-year-old daughter to have to think about, you know, "Oh I saw daddy, you know, smoking, so it must be okay for me to do that as well." It transfers into our tobacco prevention services that we have here at Guiding Right. Modeling is very important in that. They see us promoting a smoke-free environment. They see advocating the Quit Now number. They see us advocating and speaking about No Menthol Sunday, or even Kick Butts Day. They see us in the park every Kick Butts Day picking up butts and, you know, putting them into bags, and we try to have young kids out there with us, although that's not our major focus, but we collaborate with, James, oh gosh, I used to call them the Healthy Living Program back in the day...

JT: Yes. Communities of Excellence.

TN: City County Health Department. Communities of Excellence, that's right. We collaborate with those guys at the City County Health Department and they would provide those services as a joint venture doing Kick Butts Day. So I think that's all a part of role modeling and being a community influencer.

JT: Very good. Well, Theo, man, thank you so much for your time. We appreciate your time, we appreciate the work that you put in and that your staff puts in to help families and individuals achieve and maintain better health. Thank you, man.

TN: Excellent. Thank you James, I appreciate it.

[29:02]

JT: Wow, you know, as a health communication consultant at TSET, I've actually had the privilege of working with Theo and his staff at Guiding Right on media and messaging products. So it was really good to talk with him for a few minutes about No Menthol Sunday and other community-based interventions for reducing tobacco use in that community.

CH: Yeah, gosh, he seems like such a cool person, and what a cool organization! I had never even heard of Guiding Right, and they've been around for a while doing really important stuff in the community.

JT: Yes, very much so. Very much so. The state is very lucky to have that particular agency.

CH: Yeah, definitely.

JT: He talked about role modeling and such, and I know that, you know, role modeling, of course, is a big deal. You know, I remember when I was younger — I'm a bit older than you. [laughs] But when I was younger, smoking was allowed in so many other places. They were allowed in places of business and grocery stores or wherever else. Even teachers were still allowed to smoke in schools. I remember my younger brother when he was in the second grade, he had a teacher who smoked in the classroom back then.

CH: Wow. [laughs]

JT: You talk about — I know, exactly. Bad health, bad role modeling. But now because of the changes over time, norms are different and what seemed to be normal back then now is not, and role modeling has so much to do with that.

CH: I cannot imagine one of my high school teachers smoking in the classroom. That is like—

JT: What about your second grade teacher smoking in the classroom?

CH: Oh my god, no. [laughs] No. My dad was a smoker and he hid it from me for a really long time. But it was funny, one time I caught him. I was really really young and I caught him smoking on the porch after he thought I had gone to bed and I said, "Don't worry, Dad, I won't tell anyone." [both laugh] And he was like, "You were the one I was trying to hide it from!" But luckily he quit and he's stayed quit for years, so. He's tried to be a good role model for me.

JT: Yeah. There are so many role models that we see on TV, that kids see on TV or social media or movies, but no one is a bigger role model than one's own parents and grandparents and caretakers, and you really got to have a great discussion about that.

CH: I did. Shaun Pryor did — he's just so cool, and he's a volunteer firefighter, and he's been on our Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline commercials for a while. He's been a great advocate and he had a very personal story to share about the way he grew up, his parents, his own role models, but then also his transformation and how the helpline really, really helped him, and he — he said he still calls sometimes when he needs to, and he encourages—

JT: Wow.

CH: —other people that he knows need help to call. So let's listen to that conversation and you'll just see what a cool guy Shaun is.

[32:21]

CH: So, we're here today with Shaun Pryor, who has been the face of the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline success story, so hello Shaun. Thank you so much for being here with us today.

Shaun Pryor: Hey, thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it.

CH: How have you been during this pandemic?

SP: Yeah, we're good, we're good. I think for the most part, I think I spend a lot of time talking to other firefighters and friends who are going through the same thing and are at home like I am right now, and they're bored and fidgety and keep thinking about smoking, so I get to keep talking them down and telling them to call the helpline.

CH: Wow, that's great. What a way to use your time right now. 'Cause, yeah, I mean, we saw cigarette sales and tobacco sales skyrocket when people started preparing for the pandemic. They were, like, stockpiling everything. And so you actually have been using your role here to help people during this pandemic.

SP: Yeah, I've really done my best with that. I have a couple of friends who are firefighters out near where I'm a firefighter as well, and we've been having conversations. That, ironically, is one of the biggest things that they did, and I had to talk them down, and they said, "Man, I can't find toilet paper and this and that, but I've gotta get smokes," and they were just starting their quit journey, and I was like, "Look, call the helpline, but remember you can always call me, you can vent to me, you can scream at me, you can shout into the phone, I'll take it, whatever you gotta do," and so far they're doing okay, but I know that, something that I've said to everybody, dipping is part of our culture, and so getting guys to quit dipping as they get over that hump to quit, you know, that urge when you're bored and there's nothing going on and it's quiet and you're alone, oh my gosh. So yeah, it's been a blessing to have an opportunity to help others, to try to keep from doing it, even if it's just to, like, meet and stand six feet away from each other and say, "Quit it. Don't do that," you know, which I've actually done. [laughs]

CH: Wow. That's great. That's great that you can help people like that. So—

SP: Always in recovery, right? Always in recovery, man. A smoker or dipper, always, always.

CH: Yeah, well, and especially, you know, in times of uncertainty, everyone flecks to those comforts that have been there in the past, even though it can be completely destructive, but it's something familiar, so... understandable. So, Shaun, let's back up. Tell us a little bit about you. Tell us your story. You said you're a firefighter.

SP: Well, so, I would love to tell the story, I love it. So, me and my smoking story, we go back years and years ago. I am originally born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. My mom used to smoke. My mom loved to go down to the corner store, pick up a pack of smokes. I used to see her do it, obviously confident as a kid. I didn't start smoking until I was about 17 years old here in Oklahoma. I started smoking, as embarrassing as this is, by picking cigarette butts out of a bank off of Northwest Expressway and 63rd because I wasn't old

enough to buy them, so me and my buddies used to sneak over there and we'd steal the little sniped cigarettes and we'd smoke them 'cause we thought we were cool. I know that's terrible, but you know.

And that was kind of my introduction to smoking. And I mean, I smoked for years and years. I started dipping probably when I was about 25, and then I would smoke with the dip in, and I did that for many, many years. And then about the age of 35, I had a heart attack. It's funny, in the days prior to, I just, you know, I didn't feel good, you know, I felt rough. I had a heart attack alone in my apartment by myself. The next day I go to the hospital, which I was blessed to survive, found out that I had hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, which is a long way of saying I have an enlarged heart, and I had a hardening of my heart kind of around it, almost like a calcification if you will. So my heart beats harder and it has to work harder to get that blood flowing around my body. And as I talk to you, I actually have an implant in my chest right now as we have this conversation.

And so, of course, post-that, I quit. Totally quit smoking, you know, I knew I had to, I was afraid, and so I was good for about a year and a half. I was able to recover from the heart attack and started to look at the fire service. And so, I got into the fire service, managed to pass all the physicals and everything, went through academy, and as I started going through, and I'm on call, stuff like that, I'm seeing things I haven't seen before, and I start dipping. Because everybody around me dips. And I decide I'm gonna start smoking. And at first, I tried to hide it from my family, but I just kept, you know, finally, it was just part of my normal, and I started smoking and dipping again. And between my son coming to me and saying, "Dad," you know, "please. You've had a heart attack. You've almost died. Stop," and knowing that it didn't make any sense for a guy that's had a heart attack in his — I mean, I'm thirty... eight years old now, about to be 39, you know, it makes no sense. So I went to the doctor, and after a conversation, he told me about the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline, I was like, "What is this?" Wasn't interested in help because I was like, "I'm not weak, I don't need this," and I ended up calling you guys and got tons of help, and here I am now, coming up on a year without smoking, no intent to look back, and it's been outstanding.

CH: Wow. That's great. So the helpline, I mean, that literally contributed directly to your ability to quit.

SP: There's a line in that commercial that they use, and I will say it again to you right now, that the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline was instrumental in my success, I mean absolutely instrumental. You guys gave me a tool that I didn't have, and I tell people all the time, and some people, they hate to hear it, but I always say we are in recovery. I realize it's not alcohol, it's not drugs — but it is, because it's our vice, it's what we know, you know, there's so many times we can think of as smokers or as guys who dip, it was our comfort in a situation. And so you're always recovering. You know, it's always something that you might slip. It's always something, you know, that you're always trying to beat, I guess. It's your demon.

CH: So, how has your life changed since you quit?

SP: Well, first I'd like to say that my son revealed to me that kids were making fun of him because he smelled like cigarettes, and so that's changed in that I didn't know him and my clothes smelled 'cause I couldn't smell it. So that's a big change and a positive for him. But mostly, I would say health-wise. A lot of my heart muscle, while it'll never go back to the way that it should be, is, my heart is functioning at a higher level, so I think they said it's something like 88, 89%, which is outstanding when you've had a heart attack. Also, I can breathe better, I feel better. I don't get winded in the course of a conversation. There's just so many things that have become so much better health-wise for me. My breath doesn't stink. [laughs] The little things we take for granted. So yeah.

CH: So, I just saw here that you used some money that you had saved on tobacco to put a down payment on a car?

SP: That is 100% true. I was so proud of that. Sitting in my driveway right now is my Camaro. I know I'm gonna get slapped for this, but I am a huge Texas Longhorns fan—

CH: Ah! [laughs]

SP: —and I always wanted a burnt orange Camaro. Always have. So I literally, literally kept taking the money that I would've spent on my cigars and my tobacco, and we have this bucket, it just sits here in the corner, and I was just tossing the money into it. And I didn't know what I was gonna do with it, but I just kept piling it up. At one point we checked and it was up to something like 850 bucks, like no joke, it was insane.

CH: Wow.

SP: And I was confused, I was like, "We gotta celebrate, we gotta do something." Well, at the time, my vehicle that I'd had for years was kinda acting up, and I was like, "You know what? I should buy a car." And lo and behold, here we are, so. Best purchase I've made, I love it!

CH: Wow, that's awesome! [laughs] That's a great way to spend your money on something that is not gonna be bad for your health — well, depends I guess. [laughs] Obey the speed limit.

So, did you have any role models in your life who smoked or used tobacco?

SP: My mom. My mom, she — I tell ya, it's almost embarrassing when I say this. My mom has had four heart attacks. My mom has 22% heart function currently. She's alive. But my mom had me in high school, so if I'm 39, my mom is fifty... she's not even 60, I mean, she's in her fifties. And yeah, I mean, this is — this is a story, unfortunately, of systemic tobacco use, you know. And like I say, just not taking care of ourselves like we should. But my mom has been my role model my whole life, you know. And I love my mom. My dad was not a part of my life. She was it. So she was great. And seeing her smoke was normal. She tried to hide it at first when we were young, but then as we got older, she just kinda just smoked, and I thought it was normal. I always wanted to sneak her cigarettes, but I never did. But it was just part of the culture, I guess. It was just what it was.

CH: And so that had an impact on you as far as...

SP: I would definitely say as far as my decision-making to become a smoker, it made me feel far more comfortable to smoke. It made me feel fine with it, and especially when I knew that at 17, I could be a smoker, I could come home and my mom wouldn't smell it because she smoked. So she wouldn't even notice, and that made me feel more comfortable with it, which is unfortunate.

CH: Right. Well, I'm glad that your mother is doing well. So, what does it mean to you, then, to be a role model to your son and to others as someone who does not smoke, someone who has quit smoking?

SP: You're not the first person to ask me this, and I say that because my kid's school had me come and talk to them about this, because of the commercial and they saw it, and we, they, however you want to put it, had a problem. Kids, it was in fifth grade this past year, they busted, I want to say in his class alone, five kids that brought vapes to school. And they knew it was an issue, and at first, I guess, when they approached me, because I'm super involved at school, you know, and they approached me with it and they were like, "Look," you know, they were like, "I know this is weird," but I usually do the fire program and all that, and they were like, "Could you talk to them about not smoking?" And they were like, "More not vaping than anything." You guys, by the way, were instrumental in that as well. Sent me a bunch of stuff to take to the kids, so thank you.

CH: Great!

SP: I was able to leave them with some materials. Yeah, and I was able to talk to them, and it's one of those things, you know, as far as being a role model, that's something that we talked about, is, I asked them, I said, you know, "How many of you guys know someone that vapes?" And I would say 65% of the class raised their hands. And it's people that they look up to. So it's hard because I see myself in that. You know, when I was a kid, my mom, she smoked and it was normal. So it's so important for us as parents, as adults, just to make sure that we're going out of our way to make sure that we're showing these kids that you don't have to do this to be cool, and just because the vape smoke goes away real fast, that doesn't mean that it's acceptable. It's not — it's not cool. So I know that they said that it got better after the talk. It didn't stop. It's again, like I said, it's a fight. You know, I mean, here we are with kids that are 10, 11 years old who are now addicted to vapes. So it's a new — new fight, but yeah, being a role model means keeping that fight going. This isn't a war that we're gonna win here today or tomorrow or next week. We gotta dig our heels in and we gotta fight for it, so.

CH: Just changing your own behavior can impact generations of people. That's something that I find really profound as role modeling.

SP: You know, 100% true. Again, with myself as case in point, I have my mom who has a heart problem. I have a heart problem. And unfortunately my son may be predisposed to having a heart problem as well, you know. And he can be the one to break the cycle. He can be the one that says, "Okay, here I am, I'm third generation. I can say no to

smoking. I can say no, I don't want this tobacco in my life," and he can be the one that starts that new healthy chain. It just takes one.

CH: Well, so, what would you like to say to people who haven't quit yet but might need some inspiration?

SP: I would say what I wish somebody would have said to me years ago. Don't be ashamed. Know that it's gonna be hard and that you're gonna falter. There's gonna be times where you're gonna screw up. There's gonna be the time after that Thanksgiving meal where you're super full and you're like, "Oh my gosh, I just gotta have a smoke." There's gonna be moments. But when you set it in your mind, and when you believe in yourself, and when you know 'I'm ready,' it's time. And to... I would say to anyone, use the tobacco helpline. Please call the helpline. Find me on Facebook and message me. I don't care. Find someone. Get an accountability buddy. Call the helpline though. Use them. I know, I've done it before, I called as recently as just a few months ago. I mean, it's nothing to be ashamed of. And I know — I'm a big guy. I'm a firefighter, I mean, I'm a lot of things to a lot of people, but I also know that I'm not too tough, I'm not too strong to say, "I need help." So I think that's probably the biggest thing, is just knowing you can admit that you just need a hand, and that it's acceptable. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Like I said earlier, we are always in recovery as former smokers, and it's just something that sometimes we just have to reach out. Don't be ashamed.

CH: I have one more question. What is it specifically about the helpline that you found so helpful to you?

SP: No judgment. No judgment is my favorite thing. You know, when you call your buddy, depending on who your buddy is, you know, you call your buddy, you call your friend, you call up your sister, your mother, and you say to them, "Man, I really wanna smoke," they, depending on if they have that enabling personality, they might say, "Well, just have one, it's okay," or they may say, "Man, stop," you know, they may cuss at you, be like, "Dude, you're wasting my time, whatever." But you know with the helpline you're not gonna get that. With the helpline, you're always gonna get somebody who is gonna be like, "Look, I understand, I've been there," and someone who is gonna give you that conversation that you need, even if you just need to have sounding board so you can complain, they'll take it, and then they'll help you. I would say that's probably the biggest thing is there is no judgment there. It's almost like you have a random friend that you can call that's just going to be there.

CH: That's really great insight. Thank you so much, Shaun, for being with us today and sharing your experience. We really appreciate it and a lot of us really need it right now, so thank you for what you do.

SP: Hey, thank you so much for giving me — I mean, this has been a true blessing. Like I said, you guys have been a blessing to me, you guys have given me a platform to be able to share this with so many people, strangers, et cetera, and I thank you.

[46:34]

JT: Wow, Cate, you were right, Shaun is a great guy. I really enjoyed listening to the conversation. He sounds just so committed to telling others about the benefit and health of quitting tobacco. That was great.

CH: Yeah, it was really cool, 'cause, I mean, quitting tobacco not only changed his life for the better with regard to his health, but it also really gave him, like, a passion and a new direction to help other people quit. And so that's always really nice to hear, and especially when he got so much benefit from the helpline, which has helped thousands of people like Shaun.

JT: Yeah, that's true! That's true. I mean, people can get free lozenges and gum and free coaching, text messages, all kinds of things, Cate.

CH: Yeah. I think it's crazy. I mean, we have all this right here. You can call 1-800-QUIT-NOW or you can go to OKHelpline.com, whatever you're more comfortable with. If you wanna talk to someone over the phone, they're there. If you wanna chat with someone over the internet, they're there. If you wanna get two weeks' free supply of lozenges and gum and patches, you can get them shipped to you. It's crazy. It's just such a great resource. And like he said, he said there's no judgment there. There's just the person who all they wanna do is just help you quit and help you improve your life. That's a really remarkable service.

JT: That's such a good point. I mean, a lot of people who may be using tobacco who really wanna quit, they know that it's not good for your health and, you know, they know this already. They don't need to feel like they're being judged, you know, they just want help. No judgment, right?

CH: Right.

JT: And as you mentioned earlier in the podcast, with the pandemic going on, with the coronavirus going around, it really does add another reason to quit tobacco. It's hard, it's really hard, but the resources are there. The support is there. And it's great to hear people like Shaun who are so passionate about it too.

CH: Yeah, well, and just acknowledging that whether you like it or not, you are a role model. Kids, grandkids, students, neighbors — you are a role model, and so your behavior does impact the people around you, and if you're taking this pandemic seriously, you know, you are taking your health seriously, now is the absolute perfect time to quit tobacco, and you can have a ripple effect on those around you.

JT: Yeah, good point. You know, we are very happy to observe No Menthol Sunday coming up, and there are other tobacco holidays throughout the year. Great American Smokeout, World No Tobacco Day will be at the end of this month on May 31st, and other days. So those days come and go, and they give us great reasons to quit, and the coronavirus of course is another great reason to quit. But we will get through this pandemic. It will get better. It really will. But one thing that won't change is how we are as role models. We want to be our best for our kids, our grandkids, for other people who see us, who look up to us, and so from a role modeling standpoint, there's always

yet another good reason, no matter what day it is, to reach out and get help if you need it.

I enjoyed this podcast, Cate! What did you think?

CH: Yeah! I did too. It was fun. I learned about cool people doing cool things, cool organizations — yeah. Had a blast. Thanks, James.

JT: Absolutely. And with that, we do want to thank Dr. Adam Alexander and Theo Noel and Shaun Pryor for their time and their information and their insights, and we are always so very thankful to you, our podcast listeners.

CH: Thank you.

JT: And so until next time, this is James Tyree —

CH: — and Cate Howell.

JT: Wishing you peace —

CH: — and Better Health.

[Theme music]

[50:33]