

# AMERICANS FOR NONSMOKERS' RIGHTS

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### Guest Editorial — René Hicks

**Breathe in, breathe out.** We all take breathing for granted, that is, until our ability to breathe is impaired. We then find ourselves struggling for breath, because our basic instincts for survival tell us that if we can't breathe, we can't live.

In the world of comedy the highest compliment paid to a comic that has elicited maximum response from the audience is "you killed." As an internationally known, award-winning comedian, this high form of praise was often heaped upon me; I now marvel at the irony that while I was "killing" in all those smoke-filled venues, **the secondhand smoke almost killed me.** I have always used my lungs to maximum efficiency, as an All-American distance runner and all-around athlete. Then, I was diagnosed with lung cancer. I had surgery to remove part of my lung. I faced a long recovery. It was a time filled with hospital and doctor visits, dealing with related secondary illnesses, including several bouts of pneumonia, and also coming to grips with personal and professional altered realities—all due to my battle with lung cancer.

My lungs and life were ripped apart, because of the addiction-induced need of others to contaminate my breathing space by smoking. As a cancer survivor, I started wearing the yellow LIVESTRONG wristband, but I realized that I couldn't live strong if I couldn't breathe strong. So, along with my strong advocacy on behalf of cancer-related issues, I realized that my unique story created a natural nexus with activism on behalf of tobacco prevention issues, as well.

When I returned to work as a comedian a year and a half later, the choice was clear to me. **I would no longer perform in venues that allowed smoking.** I had to change how I made my livelihood, in order to live. You see, I learned the hard way that even one hour a night of performing in smoky clubs/venues almost cost me my life. *Please hear me...you can die just by breathing in the smoke from others and all it takes is minimal exposure.* However, you and your loved ones, especially your children, don't have to and you shouldn't be made to.

This is a Presidential election year. If we all do our part, we can push our legislators to ban smoking from concert halls, restaurants, night clubs, businesses and more. Roughly 75% of Americans are non-smokers—leaving only 25% who smoke. Should the rights of the majority be forfeited for the addiction of the few? No! That's just plain un-American!! No matter how you look at it, from a health, moral, or civil rights perspective, we all are entitled to the choice to breathe clean air.

Let's not sit idly by and let the effects of cigarette/cigar smoke continue to create a health crisis. We've got to fight for our right to have clean air just as passionately as those who fight against AIDS, because tobacco companies have already begun spreading their epidemic to Africa, where they grow tobacco and sell it to a population already decimated by the AIDS epidemic. So, like AIDS, this battle has gone global and it doesn't stop just at avoiding cigarette/cigar smoke, because there are no "condoms" for cigarettes—no "safe" smoking. We have to encourage and support smokers to quit, because if they don't, it could cost them and nonsmokers alike our health and our lives. Let's face it: the costs are already too high. Not only does smoking put all of our health at risk, it costs us in spiraling healthcare costs, due to the myriad of smoking-related illnesses—which are preventable. Also those smoking-related illnesses result in lower worker productivity and less American economic growth.

America is the "land of the free and the home of the brave" and Americans must be free to breathe clean air and brave enough to stand up for our right to do so! I urge you to continue to show your support for a smokefree environment. Always remember that even though "Big Tobacco" may have the monetary might, we have the civil right and "right" trumps "might"!! Demand a breath of fresh air...and another... and another and...!!

***Breathe Strong – Live Free!***

*René Hicks*