



NEWS RELEASE

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Date: April 17, 2008
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MAN BEHIND TOBACCO CAMPAIGN WANTS WIFE'S LEGACY 'TO LIVE FOREVER'

Rick Stoddard wanted the world to know that tobacco killed his 46-year-old wife. He was so passionate about it that he insisted her obituary list her cause of death as “cancer caused by cigarette smoking.”

Those few words – written out of anger, grief and love – turned him into an unlikely champion for a tobacco-free society. “I had no idea what those words were going to stir up,” he said.

Marie Stoddard’s candid obituary caught the attention of a Massachusetts anti-smoking coalition, which asked Rick Stoddard if he’d like to say a few words for a commercial. A film crew went to his home, activated the camera and let Rick talk for seven hours. The result: a series of powerful advertisements that details how tobacco destroyed the love of his life. In one, he repeats that his wife was 46 when she died of lung cancer. “I guess I never thought of 23 as middle aged,” he says.

The Rapides Foundation began airing Stoddard’s testimonials in January as part of its *Get Healthy Cenla* Initiative. The initiative focuses on the areas of tobacco, diet and physical activity.

The Foundation said it wanted a powerful message to counter the massive marketing efforts used by the tobacco industry. The industry spends about \$250 million each year in Louisiana to addict consumers to its products and to keep them addicted.

“We know that one of the best ways to reduce the power of tobacco marketing is an intense campaign to counter those pro-smoking messages,” said Joe Rosier, president and CEO of The Rapides Foundation. Staff members selected the Stoddard ads after reviewing and testing hundreds. The testimonials have been so well-received that the

Foundation plans to bring Stoddard to Central Louisiana this fall to deliver his message in person.

Stoddard, now 54, lives in Massachusetts – Marie grew up in the Boston area – but that Southern accent is from Pascagoula, Miss., where he was raised. He was 19 when he met his future wife on a Pascagoula beach. They married and moved north to be near her family.

They both smoked back then – he Camel filters and she Viceroy's. Rick quit at age 21 when their only son, Justin, was born. Marie longed to kick the habit but just never could escape its grip.

Marie was diagnosed with lung cancer on Aug. 1, 1999. She had no symptoms until the day Justin, 24 at the time, found his mom unconscious on the floor. The diagnosis came soon afterward. Marie died just five months later, on Jan. 8, 2000.

Stoddard let the film crew in his home in April of that year. He moved out of the house not long after that. The memories were too painful. But he continues to shave his head regularly – something he first did to lift Marie's spirits when radiation treatments caused her hair to fall out.

He now spends most of his life trying to take down the tobacco industry, traveling the country in his Ford pickup for speaking engagements at schools. He's on the road up to 200 days a year, leaving little time for his carpentry. But his job doesn't matter now – he won't stop until the world is tobacco-free.

His message resonates with youths, who see in him an honest man with a simple message: don't use tobacco because "it will kill you, just like it killed my wife."

"I'm just a regular guy. I don't tell them what to do," he said. "Kids are cool. They will give you a fair chance. If you're a phony, they'll shoot you down. If you're not, they'll listen to you."

By keeping up his grueling schedule, Stoddard on April 10 reached a milestone in his anti-tobacco campaign – delivering his message personally to the millionth person. He said he's "thrilled that Louisiana will be part of the second million."

Stoddard calls himself a "regular guy who was put in some extraordinary circumstances" and said he used to be a "very private guy" before becoming a national spokesman. But he's fueled by the memories of Marie.

He's had some hate mail, mainly from people saying he is "picking on the tobacco industry." But he shrugs off the cynics with this thought: "Tobacco is the only product in history that's been allowed to kill so many people. Spinach killed three people and they pulled spinach off of every shelf in the country. But tobacco kills 1,200 people a day in America and that's OK? Well, it's just not OK anymore."

Stoddard has more than 40,000 letters of support, and he keeps them all. They're from people young and old who are touched by his message. Those letters, and Marie's memory, are what prevent him from quitting it all, returning to his carpentry and spending more time with his two grandchildren.

"This has not been an easy journey, but I am determined that Marie's death will not be in vain," he said. "I hope her story and legacy will live forever."

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