



Episode Details:

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Title: Episode 17: 'Authentic Voices' – An Interview with Shaun Pryor

Description: This episode is the first in what we hope will be a new series called, 'Authentic Voices', where we speak with individuals in communities across the US to hear how their lived experiences and interactions in the retail environment impacted their journey with tobacco. In this episode, we speak with Shaun Pryor, a Chicago-native and Oklahoma-transplant who is an outspoken advocate against Big Tobacco and the manipulative tactics they use to lure youth and customers of all ages. We discuss his journey from smoking to quitting to advocacy and action, and touch on the industry's targeting of Black communities and the ways we can make lasting change in tobacco control.

Transcription:

Allie Rothschild: I'm Allie Rothschild and you're listening to the Counter Tobacco Podcast. [Music] Today is the first episode in what we hope will be a new series called 'Authentic Voices', where we speak with individuals and communities from all across the US to hear how their lived experiences and interactions in the retail environment impacted their journey with tobacco. For this first episode, I'll be talking with Shaun Pryor. Shaun is originally from Chicago, but relocated to Edmond, Oklahoma when he was a young adult. He works as a project manager and a firefighter and has been tobacco-free from cigarettes and dip for over a year now. If you're listening to this and happen to reside in the Midwest or the Southwest, then maybe you've seen him on a commercial, promoting the tobacco quitline. He's got a big smile and an even bigger passion for speaking out against the tobacco industry. I'm happy to introduce you all to Shaun Pryor. Hi, Shaun. Welcome to the podcast!

Shaun Pryor: Hi, thanks so much for having me.

Allie Rothschild: Of course! Can you first start off by telling us your earliest memories of tobacco products and how that may have influenced you to start smoking?

Shaun Pryor: I would say my earliest memories of tobacco would probably go back to being young, probably, I don't know, I guess about 10, 11 years old. My mom smoked. The irony is that my mom did a really poor job of hiding the fact that she smoked. She would go into the bathroom and she would cut on the little evaporator fan thing up in the ceiling, so we couldn't hear her lighter - which we did. And she would smoke, which was evident by, obviously, the smell of smoke in the bathroom. But she would always say, "I don't know. It must be coming in from outside." As time went, over the next couple of years, she got a little bit lazier with it. And she would still smoke in the



bathroom, still with that bath fan on, but she would just leave her ashtray there. And so that was probably how I got introduced. I would say that *is* how I got introduced to cigarettes was my mom smoking.

Allie Rothschild: And at what age did you yourself start smoking?

Shaun Pryor: Well, I would say...so I've had time to think about this, and I think I dabbled with cigarettes, with hers, me lighting her butts, and just kind of trying to check them out when I was probably about 13 or 14. As far as being able to say that I was smoking on a more consistent regular basis was probably when I moved to Oklahoma. I was about 17 years old when I was really consistently smoking. And at that point I was smoking cigarette butts that we would get out of an ashtray at a bank because we couldn't buy them.

Allie Rothschild: So you started using tobacco products when you were fairly young, around 17. And do you remember, were there any brands in particular that you tried to find or that you would purchase if you had the money?

Shaun Pryor: So I learned pretty young, I guess around the age of 17, to grow facial hair to make myself look older because it made it easier for me to go into the store because you only had to be 18 and not get ID'd. And my favorite smokes to buy, because I always saw them - Kools. Kools or Newports, those were my absolute favorites. If I could find those when I was first picking the cigarettes out of the ashtray, that was my favorite. So yeah, I would say that I gravitate towards those.

Allie Rothschild: Do you remember how or why you became attracted to those brands in particular?

Shaun Pryor: So I used to read a lot of magazines back then. We're talking early-mid-90s. At that time, it was nothing to find your cigarette ads inside of your magazines. I don't know if that's a thing anymore, but back then, that was totally normal. And a lot of the magazines that I would read were ethnic magazines. They had ads for Newports and Kools all the time. My mom smoked Kools. I thought that was cool. And then all the little stores-- so I would walk to school every day. For me to get to the stores, I had to pass all these convenience places. Everything from the bus benches would have the ads for Kool cigarettes or for Newport cigarettes where I live all the way down to the huge placards in the glass at the convenience store. And so I would say, I mean, I was bombarded with the fact that, wow, everybody around me smokes Kools. Plus when I would go to school, of course, you have the guys that would smoke in the-- they would smoke in the bathroom, whatever, always. And of course, I would say it was a predominantly African-American, Hispanic area. Everybody smoked Kools. So I think it was just geared that way towards the area that I lived and in our demographic, I guess. So, yeah.

Allie Rothschild: You said you remember walking to school or going to school and passing convenience stores with ads. Do you remember growing up if there were retailers in close proximity to you that sold these kinds of tobacco brands and products?

Shaun Pryor: Not only do I remember, there was a store that was right underneath the L train right down the street from where I lived. I remember them well because my mom talked them into selling me her cigarettes. So she would have me walk around the corner to



bring her back two packs of Newports. And they would actually sell them to me when I was like 15, 16 to bring home to her so that she didn't have to walk up the street to the store. So again, buying cigarettes, I mean, it just became like muscle memory. It wasn't anything strange to go pick up a pack. And so that kind of, I think-- yeah, yeah, I remember that, but it also helped it to feel normal.

Allie Rothschild:

Right. So you brought up Newports. You brought up Kools. Do you feel that menthol cigarettes in particular were targeted to you and your community as a result of the areas you lived in or your identity as a Black man?

Shaun Pryor:

110%. I would be wrong if I said no. And I feel like we still have a stigma, a stereotype, if you will, that predominantly African Americans love menthol. My mom to this day still smokes after four heart attacks and a device, and she still smokes menthol cigarettes. She won't give it up. But I think it's unfortunately something that's ingrained into the culture. I think a lot of people just saw it the way I did. It was what happened as a kid. And I think a lot of us were just bombarded by the ad campaigns, you know, from again, the magazines we were reading. I mean, if you read Jet or Essence or any of those magazines, I remember I was preteen and I was cutting out all these pictures of like Biggie Smalls and all this different stuff, and I'd stick them up in my room. And on the backsides, at least one of these or the next page, was always an ad for cigarettes. So absolutely 100% targeted. They knew what they were doing. They knew how to rope us in. And it worked.

Allie Rothschild:

Absolutely. It's a known the fact that their ad campaigns did indeed target Black and Hispanic and low income communities. So you've mentioned advertisements - what role did other industry techniques like price promotions or price discounts play in your history of tobacco use?

Shaun Pryor:

When I got here to Oklahoma, I would say that that's really obviously when I got into, "Okay, I'm going to buy my cigarettes for myself, blah, blah, blah." And I remember going to a Drug Emporium, and I can say that because they're now gone. I remember I would get these insane deals. They were Swisher Sweet little cigarillos, and they would come a six pack of 20 for some insane price like 9 bucks - almost like, "Hey, buy three, I'll give you three free. Here's six." It was just insane! And I remember thinking what a great deal that was. And I would say when all that started, I was probably a half pack a day smoker. Because of those, again, insane deals - it was like used car lot deals - I ended up being a two-pack-a-day smoker, I guess, for almost ever.

Allie Rothschild:

And you've brought up Chicago. You've brought up Oklahoma. Do you remember how the retail environment differed between those two locations?

Shaun Pryor:

I can tell you how it's still different to this day. Back then, I saw a lot of the Marlboro Reds, a lot of the, what they would call, cowboy cigarettes, but that's insanely popular here. Now, I see like Winston, stuff like that. I see these different brands, but you don't see the big menthol push here in Oklahoma - excuse me - here in Edmond, Oklahoma, where I live, because I live in the suburb of Oklahoma City. Now, if you go back towards, let's say the east side, the south side, these are more predominantly African American, Hispanic areas of the city - you see more of those ads. You see more of the menthol ads. So it's still targeted, so hardcore targeted to people. Out



here, for example, there's insane deals. Right now, just the other day, I saw a deal where they're selling dip in a can. I don't remember what the, who it was-- \$1.59 per can. Insane deals! But if you look down on that side of town, because not too many people dip, you don't see that. It's just these crazy deals on menthol cigarettes. So yeah, most definitely, a notable difference and still that targeted advertising.

Allie Rothschild:

Right, absolutely. And now, going back a little bit more to your personal use of tobacco, did you always just smoke menthol cigarettes or did you ever try out or use other tobacco products?

Shaun Pryor:

I smoked anything! I would smoke any cigarettes I could get. One of my favorite things was, of course-- I mean, I remember Seneca cigarettes. They're made here in Oklahoma, \$1.69 a pack. You know, anything that was cheap, because of course I was young. I had a job, but when you're young and you're a smoker, you'll take whatever you can get. So that was one of my big things was just to smoke whatever. I have smoked everything from Virginia Slims to Camels, just everything and anything. I still always gravitated back to my menthol roots, I guess. The other big thing with me and tobacco, this is a little bit ironic, so after a big health scare, I quit smoking altogether, and then I didn't do anything for a while, but I went back to it. I started smoking these cigars, Black & Mild cigars, because I felt like, "Well, this isn't so bad." That was how I tried to find a rationale. And on the back side of that, I decided to start dipping. And so I started using tons of dip pouches to the point that it was enough that I'd run through a can of that a day, and smoke some cigars.

Allie Rothschild:

Is there any reason in particular that you started dipping or did something influence you to go that route?

Shaun Pryor:

I became a firefighter back—how old am I now...I'm now almost 40, so it's been probably about 5 years I've been a firefighter. The one thing that they don't tell you when you become a firefighter is that you will see things, hear things, smell things, find things that you will never see in your daily life. There is no guidebook. There's no one that really gives you a what for. And so you find ways to cope. And I guess, because tobacco had always been there, that was what I fell back to. Compound that with the fact that in our industry, as firefighters, you see a lot of other firefighters that dip. It's just the norm. It's the thing. Man, you're up on a grass fire, you can shove a dip in, and nobody cares if you spit in the melted oven. Nobody cares because it's gone. But it's so easy. And it helps because, again, when you've seen things that you don't know how to process, that you don't feel like having a conversation about, which that's a whole other problem, you know, guys dip. And so I fell into that. I fell into that trap. And I dipped, again sometimes a can a half a day, along with my smokes.

Allie Rothschild:

It seems like you got to the point where you were using tobacco products pretty regularly and often to cope, which is a completely understandable behavior. So you kind of already alluded to it, but what prompted you to quit smoking and using tobacco products?

Shaun Pryor:

Well, at about the tender age of about 34 or 34 and a half, somewhere in there, I was a single guy living in my house. I was in my apartment, rather, just hanging out. No



big deal. I was asleep, and I thought someone was robbing me. And so I was jumping up, and I couldn't get up. I was like, "I can't get this guy off of me. He's on my chest." And I'm like, "What am I going to do?" And I start waving my arms, and I realized there's nobody there. And come to find out I had a heart attack. It is a very sobering, humbling thing at 34 years old to realize that you had a heart attack. My mother has 22% heart function as of right now. She's had five heart attacks. She has a defibrillator in her chest, and they say that they believe, at the rate that she's going, of no fault of modern medicine or anything, if she gets another five years on this planet, she'll be blessed. So it's one of those things where-- yeah, I had the heart attack, and looking at my mom and knowing that I didn't want to end up counting my years and my days like she is now, I had to quit. I had to quit.

Allie Rothschild: Yeah. Absolutely. That sounds like a very scary scenario that you dealt with. How has and was the quit process for you? You know, you seemed like you were initially in the right mindset to take on quitting, but how has that process been?

Shaun Pryor: So let me roll back. The heart attack, right after that - I'm terrified, and I did quit. The part about that that sucks is, as you said earlier, I've only been smoke-free for like a year and some change. Post the heart attack, I unfortunately slipped back again and went back to smoking again. This last year and some change, though, I ended up-- basically, I went to my doctor because I still have-- so I have AFib. I went to my doctor. We were doing a normal check-up, and I told him I was smoking. He's a great guy, and he said, "Listen. I don't know if you want to do this or not," he said. "It's up to you." But he said, "You may want to try some Chantix." And he said, "There's this Oklahoma quitline. You might want to call it." He said, "I'm not going to club you over the head." And I was like, "I don't need that at all. I'm fine." And so I started taking my Chantix, having horrific nightmares, and then because of the nightmares, I wanted to smoke. And so I said, "Screw it," and I called the quitline.

Allie Rothschild: Gotcha. So, like you just mentioned, you've been tobacco-free for over a year now, so foremost, congratulations!

Shaun Pryor: Thank you.

Allie Rothschild: Do you still get cravings when you see ads or promotions in stores or when you, you know, go to a gas station or convenience store or grocery store?

Shaun Pryor: Can I say my biggest cravings have been during the 'Rona [COVID-19] times? These last three months of sitting on my hands and not fighting fire and not doing things that I'm used to doing has been horrific. It has given me the platform, actually, to have other firefighters call me who were trying to quit and say, "What are you doing? How are you not smoking?" That said, going out in public and doing what I'm doing-- yes. I told somebody the other day-- that I said, "I've never done heroin. I've never done any crazy drugs or anything in my whole life, but I would presume that those people always say, alcoholics, etc., they always say they're always in recovery." I believe that, as a smoker, I will always be in recovery because if I'm driving sometimes-- there used to be nothing better than a smoke on that long drive. I could be on the toilet, if we're being honest, first thing in the morning-- a smoke. Oh, my gosh. After I eat a big meal at Thanksgiving-- go smoke. Man, all of those things are



triggers. And so yes, I have those triggers, and I assume I will have those triggers for years...years and years. But I find ways around it. I find ways to fight it. This right here, this avenue that you have, that you've created right here, is outstanding because it gives me that boost to remind myself, "Hey, there's a reason why I'm not smoking."

Allie Rothschild:

Absolutely. And I like how you say that it's a lifelong thing that you're going to have to deal with because you *were* pulled in and lured in by the tobacco industry. You mentioned, too, driving, and I want to bring up-- so prior to this interview, I asked you to send me a little bit of fun facts about yourself, and you included a picture of something that you were able to do, slash, get, now that you don't smoke. Can you explain what that picture is?

Shaun Pryor:

So what we started doing is we averaged out-- it was probably about \$5-something a day that I was using on my tobacco products. So we got this big jug - it was like an Ozarka thing - and we started throwing money into it just because it was like, "Okay. This is money that I wouldn't see anyway, so I'm just going to keep doing it." It took tons of discipline because I wanted to use it. After about, I guess it was December of last year, we got up to a point and that thing was plumb full. There was hundreds and hundreds of dollars in there. And so it brought up this discussion of, "Hey, we need to do something with this money." And I was like, "Man, I had a car that...I had a little SUV that I didn't really like." Long story short, I bought myself-- I am a huge Texas Longhorn fan, which sounds insane living in Oklahoma - but I bought myself a burnt orange Camaro, and it has been one of the best purchases of my entire life. And it's also been a great thumb to the eye to the tobacco industry because I was able to stop and say, "You know what? When I stop giving them my money, I realized these things that I thought that I couldn't afford-- it wasn't hard to afford at all. I just had to quit smoking." When I added up in a month how much money I don't spend on smoking, my car payment is nothing because that was money that was flying out of the house to smoke. So it's absolutely amazing how tobacco and the tobacco industry can just worm its way into your life, and they get that stranglehold on that money and you devote that cash to them, and you don't even think about it. Because it's just-- you know it's their money. So when you get it back, it's-- I don't know, it's like Christmas.

Allie Rothschild:

I love that. That's such a great story. As you reflect on all of this-- the retail environment, the tactics, the heart attack you dealt with, quitting -- I want to ask, are there any particular emotions or feelings that are being brought up just thinking about all of that stuff?

Shaun Pryor:

There's a little bit of shame. Shame that I didn't catch this earlier. Personal frustration and that there wasn't some outside force that, at the time, wasn't saying, "Man, this is completely ignorant. You have a history of heart attack and heart issues." And there is an amount of pride, I guess, because I know that I'm so truly-- like I believe in not going back to tobacco. But I would say more than anything there's really a lot of shame just because I feel like I-- my doctor said, "Everybody's born with so many ticks on their heart." Right? They're just there. And he said, "Different things - smoking, drugs, stuff like that, will pull some of those ticks off." And I think that's my biggest thing now, as a firefighter and the things that I know through medicine and things like



that, is I robbed myself of time that I'm not going to get back in this life because I wasn't educated enough about smoking. And it makes me really, really sad. And I don't just blame the tobacco industry, but I blame them for bombarding me with it and making it so accessible.

Allie Rothschild:

Absolutely. I mean, those are totally understandable feelings and emotions. I mean, the tobacco industry really manipulates people. And it's an addictive drug. It's like they rope you in and then just hold on to you. And it's so powerful that you were able to loosen that grip and channel those emotions and feelings you have towards change and making an impact, and that's what's so great about you. So moving a bit into your advocacy efforts, what prompted you to get into advocacy work for tobacco control and tobacco cessation?

Shaun Pryor:

An accidental meeting is actually what caused it. Coming across a gentleman named Robbie with TSET [Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust], who's outstanding. And heck, he doesn't even work for them. He's just a contractor who heard me talking about this, having this conversation, and he asked me, he said, "Man." He said, "Have you ever thought about being in a commercial, all this other stuff." I was like, "Absolutely not." And we've been pretty much together ever since. He got me hooked up with a commercial, and the commercial kind of was my first outlet. And post the commercial, people started finding me on Facebook-- strangers, and they were sending me messages about quitting smoking and this and that. I guess that's how I fell into it, more accidentally. It's just because people started reaching out. As opposed to me saying, "Well, just call the helpline, this and that," I said, "Hey, let me help you." And so we started talking and talking. And that led to things like with my kid, for example. He's going into sixth grade. His past year, here in fifth grade, they're having kids that are popping up with those Juul vapes at the school. I mean, you know, they're smoking them, and we're not talking this happened once or twice, but this is three or four or five times. And it's so common and normal now to vape. So yeah, I guess I just fell into it.

Allie Rothschild:

You told me previously when we chatted that you speak with youth on a bigger platform about the dangers of tobacco. So, what's important to you about protecting youth and young adults from Big Tobacco?

Shaun Pryor:

I guess my first thing is I always cover vapes. I know a lot of people love vapes. Vapes have helped people to quit smoking. I think that's beautiful. I take nothing away from that. It's an accessibility issue. Vapes, these Juul vapes, for example, and I know I keep picking on them - they're so accessible at the gas station. To the degree that I just saw the other day at a gas station that it's 99 cents to get your Juul pod. And I thought this was a joke. I even asked the lady and she broke it out. It's the whole starter kit that is \$1. With tax, it's \$1.18. I bought every one of them and threw them in the dumpster [laughter]. I kid you not. But I could not believe that. Yeah. And so that's one of the things I like to talk to the kids about is just about it's easy, it's accessible, but that doesn't make it okay. I tell kids, "So in my chest, I have a device. I have a loop monitor." And I love to use the example. I'll pull my shirt down and you can physically see it. And I'll tell them, "You don't want to be like this. You don't want to have a monitor sewn inside of your chest. That's frustrating. I can't do things that



other people can, such as walk through a metal detector or get an MRI, you know, things that you take for granted." And I try to let kids know you have so much life to live. Don't start giving up time off your life to Big Tobacco like I did.

Allie Rothschild: Right. Right. I want to shift the conversation a little bit to talking about action. And some of the most sustainable and lasting changes on a societal level are policy changes. So Chicago, where you grew up, actually became the first city to ban all flavored tobacco products, including menthol cigarettes, from within 500 feet of schools. So we were just talking about children. What are your thoughts on these types of policies that impact children directly?

Shaun Pryor: I absolutely love them. I love them! I stand by what I said earlier. Of course, I wish somebody was doing that when I was a young kid. The rough part about this is that there are a lot of people, older people, my age range, etc. who feel trampled on etc. because they're still addicted to tobacco. But I feel that we are-- I don't know what the word is-- we would be wrong, I guess, easily put, to stand aside and just let that happen. You know, yes, we need to fight for these kids, especially people like me who can say-- I mean, I can contribute a large portion of my heart attack to my smoking. I mean, that is a large part of it and that's just shameful. I don't want some other kid to walk in my footsteps. We have to fight for them. I mean, it may be uncomfortable for some, but change is uncomfortable. Change isn't always great, sometimes it feels a little sticky. It's time for us to get in the muck.

Allie Rothschild: Yeah. Absolutely. And you also mentioned when I spoke to you at an earlier date that you were really happy about Tobacco 21 being passed at a federal level, and Oklahoma, just last month in May of 2020, passed T21 at the state level to help with enforcement efforts. So why do you find Tobacco 21 so important?

Shaun Pryor: I wish it was Tobacco 25. I wish it was Tobacco 30. Push that back as long as you can because making it accessible and easy for these kids, again, is what got me stuck and what got so many other people stuck with tobacco. And I know, again, it's uncomfortable for people, but I put it like this once again: hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, that's what I have, helped along by tobacco. You have people who are fighting cancer. You have people that are-- there are so many people that are sick. It is because of our systemic use of tobacco. We can't stop. We have to break the cycle. And again, I feel like pushing the age-- again, I would make it T25 in a heartbeat.

Allie Rothschild: Yeah. So back in 2009, the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act was passed, and it established the Tobacco Products Scientific Advisory Committee to assess the impact of menthol tobacco products on public health. And they released a report back in 2011 that found that removing menthol cigarettes from retailer shelves would result in 39% of menthol cigarette smokers quitting and 47% of Black menthol cigarette smokers quitting. And they also found that if a menthol ban had been implemented back in 2011, by this year, 2020, more than 17,000 premature deaths would have been prevented and nearly 2.3 million people would not have started smoking. It's been 18 months now since the FDA under the Commissioner Scott Gottlieb announced that they would ban menthol in cigarettes and other



combustible tobacco products, but we haven't seen any further action - only a ban on the sale of some flavored e-cigarettes. So, what are your thoughts on a menthol ban or a total flavor ban and how would that affect your community?

Shaun Pryor:

So I want to start by saying this flavor ban thing would affect my household. Obviously, I don't vape. My fiancé vapes, and she vapes flavored and I have done my best to get her off of it. She is just...you know, but it is what it is. And while I know she would hate it, and she's going to hate when she hears me say this on here, I support it completely. As far as in the African-American community, it is almost criminal that we haven't had this discussion like this, openly, honestly, years ago and implemented. It is profits before people, and again, it is just-- it has to stop. I sit here as person who, again, I don't want to call myself a victim of a targeted ad campaign, but, in a way, I am. I was a kid, and I didn't get it. You know, I didn't understand what was happening. And so knowing that it's still happening, it's still out there, and people, again, put those profits before people - it's disgusting. I hope that this gains traction. I hope that something comes of this. And I hope that it happens because just making it harder isn't always the answer. Sometimes you just got to get rid of it. Take it away.

Allie Rothschild:

Absolutely, and menthol products are such a foundational element of so many disparities along racial lines and economic lines too. What kind of tobacco control legislation do you wish was in place earlier that you think may have prevented you from starting smoking?

Shaun Pryor:

I thoroughly stand by, of course, the T21. I thoroughly stand by that as wishing that was there earlier. It's funny. When I tell people now that I used to see, in magazines, that I used to see ads for cigarettes, they look at me like I'm crazy because a lot of younger people don't-- you know, they've been gone. I wish those were gone much earlier. I wish I wasn't seeing them because seeing people that look like me smoking and having a great time made me believe, "Well, heck. If I just get me some cigarettes and hang out, man, good times follow." It's no different than people that watch a beer commercial, and they're like, "Hey, the ice train shows up. Man. It's hot out here." But when you're young, you take that in a very literal fashion. You're like, "Wow." And so I wish that they had stopped that targeted advertising to us young African American people. I want to say this, and I'm going to use 'Rona [COVID-19] as part of my example. 'Rona [COVID-19] is affecting disproportionately - and I've seen this with my own eyes - a large segment of the African American community because we are genetically predisposed to heart problems, to diabetes, kidney-- just different issues that are systemic issues for African Americans. That said, I feel as though it's the exploitation, if you will, by the cigarette companies knowing Black people love menthol, so they just keep it coming, keep it coming. And again, it's an exploitation, if you will. And as I know many people will say, "Well, just stop using it." It takes time. You have to be mentally, almost physically, prepared because the detox from cigarettes sucks. As people say, you get a bad attitude, and you eat too much, and this and that. Everything is a process. And I think a large part of that process is, once again, that it was that targeted advertising. I wish that wasn't allowed.



Allie Rothschild:

Right. And there's so many layers there. There's the addictive properties of the products themselves. There's the targeted advertisements and industry tactics that still remain - the price promotions and discounts in lower income communities and the certain advertisements that are placed in predominantly Black or Hispanic communities. And then there's all those other determinants of health - the racism, the social and economic injustices, that also predispose Black individuals and African American individuals and communities to being more affected by these products. So I'm so happy that you are such a champion for a tobacco-free life. It makes me so excited to meet people like you. Do you have any recommendations for others or maybe youth who want to get involved in the fight against big tobacco?

Shaun Pryor:

So I want to first say 1-800-QUIT-NOW. And I don't say this because you're going to see my face plastered all over that. It is because they are so helpful. I have tried my best to get in there as a quit coach. But 1-800-QUIT-NOW is one of the best resources. Go to that website. Heck, just type in that phone number on Google. Just type it in. You will find so many outstanding resources. These people will send you everything from puzzles and games to keep your hands busy, which sounds silly but you'd be shocked, all the way down to actual NRTs [nicotine replacement therapies]. These people will send you nicotine gum and lozenges, I mean for free. This stuff is free! You can't argue with free! I mean, just, I wish more people would please take advantage of the resources that are out there to help you to quit. I love the fact that more people have come onboard with the realization that there is this disparity in the African American community and I bring that up not to be inclusive but because I think one of the things that is dominant in African American homes is, "What happens in this house stays in this house. You know, it's nobody else's business." We have to set that aside when it comes down to smoking and our health because while sometimes I think it's cool to say, "Ah, you're fine. It ain't no big deal. You don't have to talk to anybody," because I know that's how I was raised, that doesn't always work and it's not always effective especially when it comes down to something like this. Smoking is something that is beyond difficult to stop on your own and I would say to anyone be your own advocate. There are other people that will advocate for you but if you don't advocate for yourself and take those first steps, it'll never happen, so I would tell anybody, reach out. Get in touch. It's never too late and you've never too young. Again, at 30-some-odd years old, I'm telling you that I had a heart attack. To anybody out there, take it seriously. Don't be me. And this isn't just about race but this is just about anybody. Don't be me. Take care of yourself, and that body will take care of you.

Allie Rothschild:

And, lastly, you talked about being a firefighter and that tobacco products are sometimes used by those in your profession as well as first responders in general and then also just people to deal with stress and trauma and to cope with either their professions or their daily life experiences and even right now-- you mentioned, too, we're dealing with a pandemic, we're dealing with major movements in this country. So what would you say to people who are using tobacco to cope but have been lured in by the tobacco industry?



- Shaun Pryor: So the irony in that question is that before I came on here, I was actually, I was leaving a message, and I was talking to somebody else with the Oklahoma State Board of Health because I have started a movement to do something else - First Responder First Aid is what we call it. And we get trained to help not only in crisis with patients but to help each other. With the first responder community, especially, sometimes we need mental health first aid. And it's not first aid to patch you up, it's that *mental* health first aid. And part of that umbrella is how we cope as first responders especially. I feel like we cope with alcohol and tobacco and things that we shouldn't. And I would press anybody out there, when you're looking for that coping mechanism, you have to try something that's healthy, as hard as it can be. And if that's difficult, you have to find help because this is, as you said, unprecedented. I mean, these times there's nothing-- this ain't in the playbook. We were not ready for all of this. And so I think that's one of the biggest things is just finding ways to cope and staying connected. For the love of God, stay connected. Find people. I tell people all the time reach out, stay connected. Because by talking and being connected with like-minded, even non like-minded, heck, just debate something, other individuals. It will do so much for you on a mental health aspect, which directly affects your coping mechanisms and your desire to smoke, start smoking, stop smoking, or keep smoking, etc. It's the best way to positively affect that window with tobacco.
- Allie Rothschild: Before we close out, if on the off chance a tobacco industry executive was listening to this lovely podcast, what would you want to say to those people in charge?
- Shaun Pryor: To any of those people, I would say, first off, money isn't everything. And I would say that it is-- while I know we all have to make money and I know at base that's what they're doing, if your moral compass would allow you to, in a way, prey on other human beings in such a despicable manner that leaves a pile of bodies in your wake like rubble over the course of generations and generations, what you are doing is evil. Bodies are stacked everywhere and the amount of blood on the people's hands that work in this industry, and I know they're just trying to make a living, it's not okay. It's okay to make a change. We see right now in this world people are standing up and making changes to everything. There's nothing wrong with making a change so take it for what it is and just know that there are people out here, like me, that I'm going to keep being that nail in that paw and I'm never going to go away and I'm just going to keep on being a bother until this heart gives out. It's going to be what it is and there's going to be people just-- I mean, we are everywhere, and we're not quitting and that's the best I can say.
- Allie Rothschild: I want to hold you to that.
- Shaun Pryor: Absolutely. Absolutely.
- Allie Rothschild: Do you have any final last words to our listeners before we sign off here?
- Shaun Pryor: I want to say to you thank you for this opportunity to be able to come out here and to be able to speak all of this. You giving me a platform for me to speak my truth is quite a blessing and I hope that it positively affects at least one person out there so thank you for this platform. To anybody else out there, I know I don't know you guys. I love you guys. Hang in there because there's a light at the end of the tunnel. It took me



years to quit and be done and, you know, hey, I'm still in recovery and I will be until I'm gone. Every one of you guys out there, I mean, we're all in recovery. We're all trying to get there. Let's work together because if we can hold hands and if we can get there together, by God, there is nothing-- they cannot stop us. As has been proven in so many ways, when people come together, you can't stop them. You got to listen to them. We're coming together. The tobacco industry has no choice. We're drawing our line in the sand, and they're going to listen and that's it.

Allie Rothschild:

Well, Shaun, I appreciate so much you speaking with us today on this podcast. You are making such a meaningful impact and I hope you continue to do this good work and use your voice to make change. So, thank you so much!

Shaun Pryor:

Hey, no problem. I look forward to it and if nothing else I got an awesome car out of the deal! [laughter]

Allie Rothschild:

There we go!

Well, that concludes my conversation with Shaun. If you or someone you know would be interested in being part of our 'Authentic Voices' series, please send an email to info@countertobacco.org. The show notes of this episode will include some more information on some of the topics we covered today: the tobacco industry's manipulative tactics, menthol, the specific targeting of Black and Brown communities, policy options. But please take some time to check out our entire website! We offer a wealth of resources and tools covering all aspects of tobacco control at the point of sale. You can also follow us on Twitter and Facebook to stay informed on the most recent happenings in point of sale tobacco control. Our handle is @countertobacco. As always, thanks so much for listening to the Counter Tobacco Podcast. I look forward to you joining me again next time



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