

'Tobacco did this to me'

Cancer stopped budding baseball career

By Micah Groves

Staff Writer Web posted September 28, 2007

Gruen Von Behrens was a star high school baseball player in Illinois. By the time his junior year rolled around, he pretty much had the choice of any college he wanted to attend, thanks to his talent on the baseball diamond. Little did he know, halfway through his junior year, his whole life would change.

"I was 13 years old when I first started using spit tobacco," Von Behrens told Ardmore High School freshman Thursday morning. "The first time I ever used it was on a camping trip with some of my buddies. Some of my friends brought it along and offered it to me. I wasn't thinking about the long-term effects of the choices that I was making right then. The only things that really mattered to me at 13 were baseball, food and women, usually in that order. So I took a dip and I liked it. I liked the way it tasted. I liked the way it made me feel.

"I made the choice when I was 13 years old to put a dip of chew in my lip," he said. "And by the time I was 17 and a junior in high school, I had been diagnosed with one of the most deadly diseases known to man. It screwed up my entire life."

As part of Carter County Turning Point Tobacco Use Prevention Coalition, Von Behrens was in town speaking to several of the area high schools about the effects of tobacco use.

He has traveled to 45 of the 50 states and Canada sharing his story with students. He has also worked with professional baseball, professional football and rodeo athletes concerning their influences on young people. In addition to speaking, he has also done numerous television shows for MTV, ESPN and several news broadcasts across the country.

Von Behrens' story, while difficult to hear at some points, is certainly worth listening to.

"Halfway through my junior year, I noticed a little white spot developing on the side of my tongue," he said. "Anybody who uses tobacco knows that a little white spot is not uncommon. So I didn't think it was any big deal. I thought it would just go away."

This time, however, it didn't go away.

"What started off the size of the tip of a pencil, grew completely through my tongue over a nine-month period," he said. "The cancer actually split my tongue in half."

His mother began noticing problems with his speech and drooling when he talked.

"I told her it was no big deal, just my wisdom teeth coming in," he said. "I knew what was wrong with me. I knew what was going on inside my mouth. And I knew what it would take for the doctors to fix it. I was scared. The thought of telling my mother, who was the only parent I had, and hurting her because of the fact that I was sick with this disease because of a stupid choice I had made to put a dip in my mouth -- I wasn't man enough to do that."

It was his mother, in fact, who tricked him into going to the doctor.

"One Friday afternoon, my mom tricked me," he said. "She told me we were going shopping. But we drove right past the mall and into the doctor's office. She made an appointment to have my wisdom teeth pulled. So I get in the doctor's chair, and just before he is about to put the gas mask on to put me to sleep, I grabbed his hand and told him that I think I have cancer.

"They found my cancer on that Friday afternoon," he said. "The following Thursday, six days later, I underwent 13 hours of surgery. During that surgery, doctors cut off half of my tongue. They cut my neck from ear to ear and peeled back the skin to look to see if the cancer had gotten to my lymph nodes. After that initial surgery, I spent a month and a half in the hospital. I was fed through a tube. Since then, I have undergone 33 more surgeries to fix my face from the damage that was done when they removed the tumor."

Surgery was only one aspect of Von Behrens' treatment.

"I went through hundreds of treatments, including radiation," he said. "Radiation is one of the most awful things anyone could ever go through. Those treatments burned my face so bad that if I were to scratch my face, the skin would peel right off. I couldn't even drink water because it would burn the inside of my mouth. I went from 190 pounds to 130 pounds after radiation. For a year after radiation I couldn't drink a Coke, and I couldn't eat ketchup because they would burn my mouth. The acid in those things lit me up."

The radiation treatments also led to other structural problems with Von Behrens' face.

"I also lost my teeth to the radiation," he said. "At the age of 19 I had to have all my teeth pulled, because the radiation killed them. So I had dentures at 19. After they pulled my teeth, my jawbone couldn't heal itself. So two years later it had to be removed. They tried to replace it with a bone from my shoulder, but my body rejected that and it had to be removed. Six years ago, my doctor took my fibula, broke it in sections and put it in my face for a new jawbone. The doctor also removed skin and tissue from my leg and put it on my neck."

In addition to showing students what the effects of tobacco use can be, he also offered some thoughts on dealing with personal struggles.

"Tobacco did this to me," he said. "No doubt about it. But looking the way I do, and going through all the things that I have gone through have taught me so much about what is important in life. This experience obviously taught me not to use tobacco, but it also taught me other things that go much deeper than that. It taught me not to judge a book by its cover. That you can't judge somebody by what they look like on the outside alone. It has taught me that the most important thing to get to know about a person is their heart.

"I understand all too well how mean society can be," he told the students. "I went from a person that people looked up to, to the person that people looked at. I had life in the palm of my hand. But in a matter months, I learned what it was like to be on the other side of the fence. I learned how mean people could be just because you looked different. You learn who your friends are. My friends loved me for who I was, not what I looked like.

"My point here is to be your own person," he said. "You don't have to impress any person in this world but yourself. Once you are confident with who you are on the inside, that is when your inner beauty will shine. People will love you and respect you for what you are on the inside much more than what they see on the outside."

Von Behrens, who is now 30 and has been cancer free for 13 years, said his goal is to provide students with an opportunity to make better choices. And to let kids know that the choices they make today can affect them for the rest of their lives.

"I don't come here today as an authority figure," he told the students. "I come here today as a friend. I do this because I know in my heart that if someone would have come to me when I was your age, looking like this, I would have chosen a different path in my life. And I wouldn't be standing up here today giving a presentation about how I lost my face due to tobacco use.

"This is not a mask I wear," he said. "I can't take this off at night when I get back to the hotel because I am sick of people staring at me. Nobody made this story up, and I'm not up here reading this to you. This is the story of my life."

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