

Alaska Dispatch

News and voices from the Last Frontier

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We take our smoke-free air for granted, until it is in our face, or more disturbingly, in our children's faces. We all have a right to the expectation of smoke-free air.

My father, Harold Murray Sparck, was a natural resources consultant. From 1969 on, he worked tirelessly to build up the first grassroots environmental movement to represent Native interests as stakeholders in resource exploration and exploitation, namely for the Yup'ik / Cup'ik of the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta, but also for other demographics of the coastal and interior areas of the state. With Nunam Kitlutsisti (Stewards of the Land), the Association of Village Council Presidents, the Bering Sea Fishermen's Association, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, the State of Alaska and the Alaska Board of Fisheries, Alaska Board of Game, the Mink Festival, the Community Development Quotas, and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, my father and many of his contemporaries subjected themselves to thousands of hours in meetings as engaged citizens and advocates. In those days, my father had to endure rooms full of secondhand smoke for as much as 10 hours a day in marathon meetings. He'd come home from a trip, and his luggage and clothing would reek of smoke.

Unable to shake a cough, my father got an X-ray, revealing both lungs riddled with tumors. This was only a few weeks after his 51st birthday. The doctors gave him two weeks to live. He rallied enough to settle his affairs, but he died 10 weeks after diagnosis. My father was not a smoker.

The state of Alaska currently does not have a strong smoke-free law. However, many communities have passed strong local laws. The City of Bethel was one of the first communities to opt for a smoke-free law, three years after his death, in 1998. Anchorage, Klawock and Haines Borough have passed 100 percent smoke-free laws that cover all workplaces, including all restaurants and bars. It is still too much that only half of Alaska's population is covered by a current smoke-free workplace law. No one should have to choose between their health and a good working environment.

We need legislation to combat this workplace threat. Secondhand smoke is a major cause of needless, preventable suffering and death. And it isn't only cancer we need to worry about; non-smokers exposed to secondhand smoke increase their risk of heart disease and lung cancer by up to 30 percent. Ventilation and other "air-cleaning" methods cannot scrub the damage that secondhand smoke causes. Comprehensive smoke-free workplace policies are the only effective way to eliminate secondhand smoke exposure in the workplace. We know enough now about the dangers of smoking, and secondhand smoke, to do something about our workplace health.

Michelle Sparck lives in Bethel, Alaska, where she and her sisters manage ArXotica, an Arctic natural cosmetics company.

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