


# A VERY PERSONAL CRUSADE AGAINST SMOKING

## Introduction

### Focus

Barb Tarbox, a 41 year-old former model and lifelong smoker from Edmonton, was diagnosed with lung cancer in the fall of 2001. Shortly after her diagnosis she made it her mission to turn as many young people as possible away from smoking. This *News in Review* story focuses on the heroic crusade of Barb Tarbox as well as the current state of the anti-smoking war in Canada.

 Sections marked with this symbol indicate content suitable for younger viewers.

"You can't get this kind of pain. It's just not worth the cigarettes. You have to quit smoking." — Barbara Tarbox

Barb Tarbox finishes her presentation in a gymnasium packed with high school students and waits for one-on-one questions from students with the courage to approach her. The effects of cancer are clear. She has lost her hair. She is quite thin and she looks fragile. One 17-year-old boy approaches her, crumples his pack of cigarettes and places it in her hand. He vows never to smoke again. "You're going to make it," says Tarbox.

Some have described her as "the anti-smoking lobby's most powerful weapon." Since being diagnosed with stage-four terminal lung cancer, Tarbox has made it her mission to convince as many teens as possible to say no to smoking. Working with her best friend Tracy Mueller, Tarbox has spoken to over 15 000 high school students, mostly in her home province of Alberta. Tarbox hopes to reach 50 000 students before she dies.

It is the candour and honesty of Tarbox's message that has hit home with those who attend her presentations. Tarbox describes how she lost her mother when she was 21. Her mother smoked for 40 years before being diagnosed with lung cancer. One of the oncologists (cancer specialists) working with her mother asked Barb Tarbox if she was a smoker. When he heard the answer, he said, "You have to quit or I'm going to see you here in 20 years." Nineteen years later, Tarbox was shocked to learn that she had terminal lung cancer. She recalls making excuses for not quitting smoking at the time of her mother's death, thinking that they would find a cure for cancer before she would need to quit. Upon receiving her

diagnosis, she recalls telling the doctor, "I don't even have a cough." The doctor said, "Fifty per cent of lung cancer victims have zero symptoms, and 50 per cent of lung cancer patients at diagnosis are terminal, stage four. You're dying."

With this dire reality staring her in the face, Tarbox gained the courage to help others to avoid her fate. Working with Tracy Mueller, Tarbox began accepting invitations to speak at Edmonton-area schools. She fashioned her presentations on the blunt recognition of her own mistakes and the effects of cancer on her body. "You are looking at the world's biggest idiot," she tells students. She recalls beginning smoking at the end of grade 6 and, despite getting violently ill after her first puffs, maintaining the habit to fit in with the cool kids. By grade 9, Tarbox was smoking a pack a day. By grade 10, the cool kids were no longer cool and Tarbox was addicted to nicotine. She encourages teenagers to avoid the trappings of labels like "cool" or the "in crowd." Instead, she encourages them to foster a sense of self-confidence and pleads with them to learn from her example.

Tarbox's message also focuses on the physical dimension of living with lung cancer. She tells students how the cancerous tumours have spread through her body. She speaks of the way cancer has started to slur her speech and disfigure her body. "Look at my arms," she says. "I don't know if you can see it but it's where the bones stick out. You know what? The bones stick out of every area of my body now. My feet, my legs are blue, or they like to call it *cyanotic*, which is like a purple tinge.

**Did you know. . .**

An estimated 24 per cent of young people, aged 14-18, smoke in Canada? The largest single group of Canadian smokers is in the 20-24 years range.

And you know what happens? When your tissues start to die, they turn black. Oh yes! Oh yes, people. They turn black. And there isn't perfume on the market that can hide that smell. All the result, 100 per cent smoking."

Finally, Tarbox deals with the emotional price she is paying for smoking. During each presentation, she asks students to imagine saying goodbye to someone they love, and to imagine that they are never going to see that person again. This is the reality that Tarbox faces each day, knowing that her death is near, and that she will have to leave her best friend Tracy Mueller, her 10-year-old daughter Mackenzie, and her husband Pat, far sooner than she had imagined. The effect of this message on

the hearts of Tarbox's audience is dramatic as people are forced to deal with their own mortality and the mortality of those they love.

Barb Tarbox made it to Christmas of 2002, despite being told by doctors that she was at death's door. She thinks that the teenagers that she is speaking with are giving her the energy to live longer than most expected. She says, "Nothing is going to slow me down at this point—even if I'm blind and in a wheelchair—I will keep going." In the meantime, as the cancer progresses, Tarbox is using her remarkable willpower to cheat death and, through her message, save the lives of many young people. (Quotes are from [www.cbc.ca/national/news/finalact/](http://www.cbc.ca/national/news/finalact/).)

**To Consider**

1. Why do you think some people refer to Barb Tarbox as the "anti-smoking lobby's greatest weapon"?
2. What warnings did Tarbox get that indicated that she needed to quit smoking?
3. Why do you think it was very hard for Tarbox to quit smoking?
4. What does Tarbox think has been giving her the strength to live longer than anyone expected?

**Reflection**

Imagine having to say goodbye to someone you love. Imagine you are never going to see them again. Write a 250-500 word letter to that person, telling them how much you care for them and how much you are going to miss them.