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Getting Personal On Restaurant Smoking

Column By Dennis Byrd

Donrey News Little Rock Bureau

It's time to fess up; I used to be a smoker. I'm embarrassed to admit it, even though it was 20 years ago, but sometimes you have to tell all to make a point.

They (whoever THEY are) say reformed smokers are the very worst smoking Nazis. Maybe THEY are right. But, if so, maybe it's because those of us who were smokers understand more than others just how disgusting a habit it is.

It's much more than disgusting, however. It is a health risk, not just to those who do it but to those who have to smell it, therefore inhaling unwanted carcinogens into their bodies. (If you're thinking there are no scientific studies to support the harmful effects of second-hand smoke, you're wrong, so keep reading.) Smoke streaming from another's cigarette, cigar or pipe or, even more disgusting, smoke that's been in someone else's mouth and/or lungs makes this personal preference of smoking worse than other "legal" activities.

It also offends me, but there are many things that offend me. I'm offended by my own obesity, for example, but it has almost no effect on those around me unless you happen to draw the seat next to me in the coach section of an airliner.

I have friends who smoke, relatives who smoke, others I know and respect who smoke. I don't like them or love them any less because of it. There are even a few -- precious few -- in that number that I would sit next to without complaint as they puffed away. Of course, I would then take my sinus medication, shower and change clothes as soon as possible.

A study published this year in the Journal of the American Medical Association indicates that nonsmokers who inhale just 30 minutes of second-hand cigarette smoke developed constricted blood flow around the heart, which can lead to heart disease.

In a news release last summer resulting from hearings on a proposed restaurant-smoking ban, the mother of a 7-year-old girl with asthma said her family could not go out to a restaurant with smoking sections.

Gov. Mike Huckabee says that's not a problem. He says he votes with his feet by going to a different restaurant. Even the governor knows that's not always possible, that dining experiences aren't always at restaurants of one's choosing. There are meetings to attend, there are restaurants chosen by friends with whom you have agreed to dine and, most importantly, there are at least 14 counties in Arkansas that don't even have smoke-free restaurants from which to choose.

The state Board of Health studied the issue of restaurant smoking for almost two years and decided after lengthy hearings and research to impose a smoking ban in restaurants whose primary business is food service. Establishments that do 30 percent or less of their business as food service would have been unaffected.

Although the study and public input were exhaustive, Gov. Mike Huckabee took only one day to decide not to sign the regulation, therefore rendering it void.

Why would a populist governor who promotes health care for children, is allergic to cigarette smoke and, in his words, deploras tobacco use, refuse to sign the regulation?

He has a list.

- It's a property-rights issue.
- There's a threat of litigation.
- The Board of Health is appointed, not elected.
- The same things can be accomplished by local ordinance.
- Consumer preference eventually will force restaurants to ban smoking anyway.

One thing missing from the governor's list is that he has drawn financial support from the tobacco industry in past races. In 1998, the easily discernible contributions to Huckabee from tobacco totaled more than \$6,000.

In this space last week, but not on his list, is the information that his campaign treasurer and a top consultant either are or have been tobacco lobbyists.

I guess I'm just disappointed. I thought a governor who takes every opportunity to go on TV to talk about his state-sponsored insurance program to keep Arkansas kids healthy would surely take one more step in that direction.

As my usually apolitical brother-in-law said a week or so ago: The governor had an opportunity not just to make a change, but to make a difference. And he blew it.