

Matters of Substance

UP IN SMOKE

by guest author Bethany Thies

I am a mother. I am a former smoker. I am a smoke-free public spaces proponent. (Audible groan) I know, we are the worst. I say this with full recognition of the social implications of my "type". The smoker gone good. Once lighting up and now waving my hands wildly in front of my childrens' faces as we pass through a cloud of smoke. I see the humor in the portrayal. I see both sides of the tightly drawn line in the sand.

There is much to be said about the topic of second-hand smoke. There are facts and figures. There is research. There are tedious reports with covers meant to make an impact. There is money being poured in support of both sides of an argument, and in-between are the affected; smokers and non-smokers. Those who strongly feel that they have a right that is being dangerously tread upon. Both sides with well formed thoughts. Both sides with incredibly valid points and both lacking the forum to begin a conversation. At the end of the day, this isn't a discussion about health statistics, or one that requires charts and graphs. It is about feelings. It is about human nature. It is about wanting to stand your ground because someone else has decided that their reality is more vibrant and true.

We have become so set in our positions, so ready to stand our ground, that we do not actually pay attention to the topography of the ground we're standing on. We become lost in the fight. Too lost to discuss, to mediate, to avoid "war". We forget that we have important work to do together.

The smoking debate is rife with righteous anger. Even through the conviction of my opinion, I must acknowledge that instead of coming to battle, we need to ask each other to dance. It's a give and take. Each side has to have a chance to lead, each side a time to follow. A breaking of bread. Debate and compromise. In the truest form of the word, both sides must agree to give something up, a matter of substance, in order to achieve an outcome in a positive direction.

Where do we start? We start here. We pick a table. We come to it tentatively. We sit down with respect, ideas and a willingness to lay down the charts and cigarettes for an hour or two and work together. In a debate where both sides stand to lose a right, both sides must be equally represented. In a debate where

both sides determine the outcome of those without voices, the conversation must be fair. In a conversation about feelings, no one side is any more right than they are wrong. Let's just say it; concessions must be made on both sides.

Are we ready to jump in instead of dangling our politically correct toes over tepid waters? Are we ready to say, "We don't agree, but, we can hash it out, respectfully? We can agree to disagree and still make progress." I think so. I have faith in our ability to not bash each other over the head with cardboard, public health pie charts and American flags.

I sincerely thank you for moving your cigarette off to the side when my children and I walk down the street. And, you don't have to say it, I know you appreciate the fact that I do not overtly, drama cough and wave wildly as if under attack by a team of wasps as I walk by. It's easy to be courteous when we view each other as neighbors instead of the opposition. Neighbor, it's time to talk and, yes, you can borrow a cup of sugar.

Let's begin this conversation today. Take a quick survey to gather the opinions about smoke-free places and events from community members who currently smoke, previously smoked, or never smoked. Please visit www.brattleboroareapreventioncoalition.org

Bethany Thies is a mother of four, writer of the chronic sarcasm and tom-foolery blog [Bad Parenting Moments](#) and the founder of the local smoke-free group, [Up In Smoke](#) "Matters of Substance" is a collaborative column of the [Brattleboro Area Prevention Coalition](#) (BAPC), a local nonprofit that organizes community efforts to be involved in the ongoing prevention and reduction of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse in the Windham Southeast area. The coalition meets in Brattleboro on the second Friday of each month at 12pm, from September – June and all are welcome.

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