

I Finally Kicked Butt!

When Allen Carr of the Easy Way to Stop Smoking phenomenon invited GEORGINA BRENNAN to try to quit smoking, she agreed to do it for the laugh. Little did she know it would actually work.

BEHIND a bush in the grounds of a mental hospital in Carlow town is where I had my first cigarette. I was 15.

I went over to smoke because a fella I fancied smoked there. He didn't notice me.

I never got the boy but I found a new friend. The cigarette.

At 15 my life revolved around the smokes. I would offer to babysit at aunt's houses if they smoked. If they didn't smoke I never offered. It was harder to smoke in a non-smoking house.

But I wasn't too bad at that stage. I would only ever smoke when there was a cigarette available to me.

Indeed I could go for days without smoking only to light up when offered a cigarette. I never had any money to buy them, as any cash I had went on clothes.

But then I got a job in a clothes shop and the employee discount allowed me to buy cigarettes. But once away from cigarettes, I didn't give them a second thought.

I hitchhiked to the south of France from the south of Ireland when I was 16, and the only time I needed a cigarette was when a truck driver tried to assault me. I hit him with my guitar case and ran 20 miles to Paris and the Gare de Lyon where I took a train down south.

In France everyone smokes Gauloises, or if they are really cool American cigarettes, Lucky Strikes. I would smoke them, or Gitanes, if I was offered one.

But I wouldn't have considered myself a smoker until I moved to Majorca off the coast of Spain and took up Camel cigarettes. When someone had come out on holiday and returned to Carlow with pictures, my mother called me and said she had seen that I smoked. It was all out in the open then, no need to hide it anymore, so I grew comfortable smoking.

Smoking was a part of me, just like my inability to stop talking. I was a smoker.

After Spain I lost my voice from smoking the unfil-



Georgina smokes her last cigarette.

tered Camel. I really needed my voice so I switched to a lighter cigarette, Camel Lights.

I smoked all the time — in the office at my newspaper in Carlow, in the gardens of University College Cork when I was supposed to be studying archaeology, waiting for a taxi, cycling my bike — you name it, all the time. In those days you could smoke anywhere, as there were none of the restrictions on smoking in public places that are in effect now both in New York and Ireland.

Even though I could barely afford food as a student, I could always afford cigarettes. I would smoke 20 cigarettes in a bar while sipping the same pint of blackcurrant and water.

Cigarettes were my friend, my constant, my reassurance, my shoulder to cry on and my supporter. I would panic if I thought I didn't have any cigarettes, and I often remember phoning people who were on their way to my house to bring smokes with them for me.

Sometimes after a night of drinking alcohol I would swear I would never smoke again. Every hangover is a new experience, but a smoking hangover brings your head and your throat to a whole new level.

I would last one day, maybe two. Then back again fishing through my

drawers looking for a spare cigarette.

I tried to be considerate on Sundays, not for religious reasons of course. I would promise to never smoke around my boyfriend who didn't smoke. As soon as he would leave my house to go home on a Sunday night, I would light up.

When anyone went on a foreign holiday and asked me what I would like brought back they would

hardly have finished the sentence before I would shout, "Cigarettes!"

It was too hard to think about kicking the habit. I had met people who talked about how they quit and still after 10 years craved them. I didn't want that kind of misery in my life. I didn't want to miss out.

I remember chatting with friends over pints when I had never heard of coming to New York, and saying I

law abiding citizens stand outside in minus degree weather for a smoke?

Smoking outside made me feel like a prostitute, and that's no offense to prostitutes. I felt that way because anytime I was standing outside a bar smoking a cigarette I was propositioned in very colorful language.

And I'm not that gorgeous. These fellas were drunk, and through the

would never go to America because they didn't let you smoke there. When I was invited here smoking crossed my mind but I decided I would cope. I came to New York. And I continued to smoke.

When the smoking ban came in a couple of years back I, like every other smoker in New York, yelled "conspiracy" and "harassment." Imagine making good

haze of smoke I looked pretty decent. But the comedians grew tired and I began to hate having to go outside.

I hated coming back to the table where my friends would all be laughing about something that I missed. Nobody ever wants to repeat a funny story because you lose the humor in the repetition. Still, I had no notion of giving up.

This Christmas I had bronchitis and couldn't smoke. It didn't stop me trying.

My boyfriend pleaded with me to give up. So did his family, my dad, our personal trainer and pretty much everyone I knew.

But if pleading was going to work, don't you think I would have quit years before? I knew about the health risks, I'm not stupid, but I didn't think I could quit. I would be leaving my friend alone, and that just wasn't right.

In fact, things got so bad that I would sit and hope my boyfriend would go to bed so I could smoke in peace.

WHEN the people from the Allen Carr phenomenon called and invited me to try to stop smoking at their clinic, I laughed and

CONTINUED ON PG. 35



Her stash of cigarettes in the trash can.

Photo by Georgina Brennan