

Holy smoke! She did it!

□ Seasoned SP reporter stops smoking for good

By Lori Coolican
of The StarPhoenix

Tuesday Dec. 10, 2002

8:45 a.m.

Highway 16

I'm halfway to Battleford to cover a trial when I realize my cigarettes are sitting on the coffee table at home. Curses! "No, this is good," I tell myself sternly. "I'm quitting anyway, right?"

Arrangements have been made for me to attend "Allan Carr's Easyway to Stop Smoking Clinic" at the Parktown Hotel in two days. They say I'm not supposed to try quitting in the meantime, but testing my resolve can't hurt.

I spend several minutes picturing myself walking into the old Queen's Bench courthouse in Battleford, swollen with pride at my new-found self-control. Maybe I can go all day without a cancer stick.

Ten minutes later, I pull into the next gas station and fork over \$10, then curse my own weakness as



—SP Photo by Richard Marjan

Lori Coolican takes a giant step forward by emptying her ashtray

I puff away in the frozen parking lot next to my (non-smoking) rental car.

■ CONT'D: Please see Smoke/A5

Tuesday, December 31, 2002

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

The StarPhoenix

LOCAL A5

Smoke: Positive thinking at heart of clinic message

■ Continued from A1

Damian O'Hara, the Allan Carr clinic leader, has his work cut out for him.

Like all smokers, I don't need a lesson on the negative aspects of my habit — the expense, the health risks, the smell — blah, blah blah. I'm not a smoker because of ignorance about the consequences.

Those pictures on the packages are a big joke to people like me, especially the drooping cigarette threatening male impotence. I love that one — it's so cute.

I've cut down to just one or two a day in the past, but never managed to quit altogether for more than a few days at a time. And those were miserable, cranky, hellish days for me and everyone in my general vicinity.

I'm weak — pure and simple. But really, it's time to quit. I hear they're going up to \$14 a pack in January. Too rich for my blood.

So when someone handed me an e-mail in early November offering a free seat at Allan Carr's clinic to any journalist planning to write about the experience, there was no reason to refuse.

"If it doesn't work, I can just make fun of it," I thought. "Consumers need to be warned about rip-offs, and the offer doesn't stipulate that I have to write a positive story."

The e-mail bragged that Carr has been nominated for knighthood because of the stop-smoking method he developed in 1983 — a method that has "helped multitudes of people quit easily and permanently."

But I had never heard of the guy, so

how could he be that famous? People make outrageous claims all the time. He's probably some fly-by-night con artist, I thought then.

I turned to the Net for background research. The Allan Carr Web site was packed with vague-sounding information — not a miracle cure in sight. He claims an 80- to 90-per-cent success rate, with no cravings or weight gain — and no willpower necessary. If it sounds too good to be true . . . you know the rest, right?

I wandered through the site, snorting derisively. Then I went for a smoke.

A month passed and I gave little thought to the clinic looming Dec. 12. When I enrolled, I was told to take my cigarettes with me, because we could smoke all through the session. That seemed a bit odd. And there would also be a kind of "ceremonial last cigarette."

"Oh, please," I thought.

Wednesday Dec. 11, 2002

9 p.m.

My house

We're having a small gathering with friends in our living room. The red wine is flowing, blue smoke is drifting in the air. Good times.

Then I remember the clinic. Carr says I'll be a happy non-smoker in less than 24 hours. Yeah, right.

But I'm starting to dread this assignment. I look at the smouldering tube in my hand with a pang of sadness. Sadness? Quitting would be a good thing, wouldn't it? But come on — I mean, how can a stranger make me quit smok-

ing by talking to me for a few hours? Preposterous.

So I start planning how I'm going to expose Carr's Big-Scam-of-a-Way-to-Quit-Smoking. For the first time in my life, I consciously chain-smoke. This is never going to work.

Thursday Dec. 12, 2002

9:15 a.m.

The StarPhoenix newsroom

I arrive at the office pumped up with caffeine and nicotine, ready to turn my jaded journalistic eye on Damian O'Hara. I drop a few wise-cracks about having a smoke when I get back, and head out the door.

4:15 p.m.

The Parktown Hotel, Room 139

I'm cured. It's almost eerie.

I gleefully toss a nearly full pack of cigarettes into a garbage can, where it comes to rest with several others in a pile of ashes, butts and lighters. There is no doubt in my blissful mind, I will never taste nicotine again.

I walk back to the office and stun my colleagues by announcing, "I think this is actually going to work." It takes them several minutes to realize I'm not being sarcastic this time.

When they question me further, I launch into enthusiastic descriptions of everything Carr's method is not: It's not hypnosis, aversion therapy or nicotine-replacement therapy.

There was nothing for sale, and the one person who asked where he could buy

one of Carr's books was told to go to a bookstore and "get the thin one, not the thick one."

It turns out Carr has a reputation in Europe, and he takes pains to keep it a good one. Clinic leaders like O'Hara — who describes himself as a former three-pack-a-day addict who did advertising work for two big tobacco companies — are hand-picked, and a failure rate of more than 10 per cent is considered unacceptable within the organization.

Everyone wants to know what happens at Carr's clinic, but it's a struggle to describe it. I always end up sounding like an infomercial. But it's not scary or weird or contrived, and it's actually kind of fun.

O'Hara talked about the tobacco industry, the physical symptoms of nicotine withdrawal (they're actually quite minor, once you realize the real craving is mostly in your head), and all the reasons each of us smoke. None of it sounded like a lecture. It was more like a small group of people (there were only six in the room) having an interesting conversation that lasted all day. I found myself nodding my head a lot, chuckling and thinking, "Yeah, that makes sense."

The "power of positive thinking" sounds lame, but it may very well be at the heart of Carr's system. Quitting is easy if someone credible convinces you it is. I'm usually the most cynical doubter in the room, but midway through the session, I had a sudden feeling of relief — I was going to be free!

Carr has reportedly freed movie stars,

tobacco executives, and every kind of smoker. He is a rare breed of guru — a non-flake who delivers what he promises. I had never heard of him because he doesn't advertise. Clippings from European newspapers and magazines, as well as letters of praise from medical professionals, show he's drawn raves for more than a decade overseas.

The cost of enrolment is not cheap at about \$375, but you can spend more on cigarettes in just two months. It's refundable if it doesn't work.

The makers of Zyban should seriously worry about this.

Thursday Dec. 19, 2002

10:25 a.m.

StarPhoenix newsroom

I've been in a really good mood for a week now.

It lasted through morning coffees, a night at the club, two house parties, movies, meals and several trips around town in the car — all times when I should have been gnashing my teeth wanting a smoke, instead of chuckling to myself. Bizarre.

In fact, I really should be fighting the urge right now. The StarPhoenix's ventilated smoking room is only a few steps from my desk, and I'm about finished writing this story.

Don't make me laugh.

By the way — Damian O'Hara may return to Saskatoon for more clinics in mid- or late-January. Call Shirley Baird at 933-1875, or e-mail easywaysask@shaw.ca for more information.