A crusade to snuff out smoking

R.J. Reynolds heir tries to undo family legacy of damage

By Robert Channick
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

As a son of America's first family of tobacco, Patrick Reynolds would seem an unlikely crusader in the campaign to curtail smoking. But after watching his father, brother, aunt and other relatives succumb to tobacco-related illnesses, the grandson of R.J. Reynolds is eager to bite the nicotine-stained hand that once fed him.

Reynolds offered a unique perspective and a powerful anti-smoking message in a recent presentation at Saint Francis Hospital in Evanston. "The more I learned about the tobacco industry, the angrier I became," said Reynolds, 64. "As a Reynolds, I get to make a difference on the tobacco issue by fighting back."

A noted anti-smoking advocate for more than two decades, Reynolds and his family have long since parted ways with the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co., the nation's second-largest purveyor of cigarettes, which was founded in 1874 by Richard Joshua Reynolds.

Richard Joshua Reynolds inherited great tobacco wealth after the patriarch died in 1948, but pursued myriad interests outside the business. Estranged from his father for years after his parents' divorce, Patrick Reynolds became reacquainted with him as a 9-year-old — just in time to witness the onset of his emphysema.

"My only memories of my father are of a man lying down, gasping for breath," said Reynolds, a 64-year-old philanthropist and the president and CEO of the Reynolds Group of Companies. He is also the chairman of the board of Reynolds American Inc.

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Patric Reynolds, Foundation for a Smokefree America

That same year he spoke at a congressional hearing to advocate a tax on all cigarette advertising. In 2008, he co-authored a book called "The Gilded Leaf," an acclaimed account of his colorful family history. The next chapter, however, proved to be a remarkable turn. Inspired by the power of attaching his name to anti-smoking advocacy, that same marketing and distribution of tobacco products. The bill was signed into law in June 2008 by President Barack Obama, an admitted closet smoker who has struggled to kick his own habit.

Reynolds spoke at Saint Francis Hospital as part of the hospital's monthly focus on heart health. The hospital is a leader in cardiac care. About 440,000 deaths are attributed to smoking-related illnesses each year. While many people associate smoking with lung cancer, it is also a leading cause of heart disease. Smoking increases blood pressure, decreases exercise tolerance and increases the tendency for blood to clot, the American Heart Association says.

"I have chosen this work partly to honor my father," he said. "I think he's up in heaven rooting me on, along with my grandfather."

HEALTH NOTES

WELLNESS FAIRS
- Annual Health and Wellness Fair, 9 a.m. to noon Saturday, The Grove Banquets, 381 N. Weiland Road, Buffalo Grove. Participants include Advocate Condell Immediate Care, Lake County Health Department, Affinity Healthcare and American Diabetes Association. Free, open to the public.
- Family Health and Wellness Expo, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, Park Place, 550 S. Park Blvd., Streamwood. Free admission. Visit streamwoodparks.org.

MENTAL HEALTH
- Family-to-Family Education program, 12-week course for families of persons diagnosed with serious mental illness offered by the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Cook County North Suburban Chapter, Thu to Sat 9:30 a.m. starting March 3, New Trier Township High School-Northfield campus, 7-9 p.m. Northfield. Free, space is limited. To register, call 630-716-2252.

SEMINAR
- Managing Anger, Depression and Anxiety in Youth and Adolescents, Maine Stay Youth and Family Services, 7 p.m. Tuesday, Maine Township, 1700 Ballard Road, Rock Ridge. Cost $3 per person or $5 per family if paid by Friday, and $7 and $8 at the door, space permitting. Financial aid available with proof of need. Call Michelle Lyon at 630-297-2910, ext. 277 or visit mainetownship.com.

CHILD CLINICS
- Immunizations for ages 2 months to 18 years from any community, 3:30 to 6 p.m. Monday, no appointment necessary. For Hoffman Estates residents age 2 months through kindergarten only by appointment March 9. Hoffman Estates Village Hall, 1900 Hassell Road. Cost $5 for residents, $10 for others (cash, check or All Kids only). Bring immunization records. Call 847-738-4830 for appointment.

LECTURE

PARKINSON'S
- Clinical social worker Amy Bash will discuss depression, Barrington Area Council on Aging's Parkinson's Disease Education group, 10 a.m. Saturday, Performing Arts Center at The Garlands of Barrington, 1000 Garlands Lane. Call Bonnie Scheinfeld at 847-589-7890. Please send health events at least two weeks in advance to pbenison@tribune.com or fax to 847-755-6930. Listings cannot be guaranteed.