

The Statistics Are Never the Whole Story

By Mel Lavine

Special to the Times

As the Lady Friend was heading out for her morning walk, I reminded her not to forget to bring back a pack of cigarettes. Non-filter, I added.

“But of course,” she said. “Don’t I always?”

It's a standard joke. We're often feigning a smoke. Although we both kicked the habit long ago, truth to tell, we still miss 'em, especially with our cocktails before dinner.

When the Lady Friend returned , I was chuckling over an item in the paper. It was about Obama's health, diet, and struggle to quit smoking.

"What's so funny?" she said.

"The president's bad cholesterol is up 42 points since 2007," I read. "Robert Gibbs, his press secretary claims, Obama loves burgers, French fries, and desserts like ordinary people and like millions and millions across the country he's been unable to stop smoking, too. The press may think the president carries arugula in his pocket to snack on, but that's not so."

"That is funny?"

“It’s smart politics. When Obama was elected a lot of people thought he walked on water. Now we know he’s not perfect. He’s a politician 24/7 trolling for votes, and I say it’s about time.” But the president ought to quit cigarettes cold turkey and set an example.

A heavy smoker in my youth I quit at 35 in 1964. The Lady Friend, a light smoker, called it quits twenty-five years ago at 50 when she started walking.

Everybody’s heard the statistics.

Cigarettes kill more than four hundred thousand people in this country every year; a tragic irony since smoking is the number one preventable cause of death.

But statistics can never be the story.

A few days later, around eleven on Sunday morning, the phone rang. It was the wife of an old pal with whom I’d shared many exciting years on “Sunday Morning” at CBS. One of the finest

journalists you'll ever meet, a guy with the sharpest Maine wit, and one of my dearest friends, had died the night before. We'd last seen him and his wife last September up in Maine. He didn't look so hot. I pegged him to be about seventy-five.

Although I thought I knew the answer, I asked his wife the cause of death. After a struggle, she answered, "COPD."

"COPD?"

She filled in the blank. "Chronic Obstructed Pulmonary Disease."

"Cigarettes?"

"Cigarettes."

This column originally appeared on March 4, 2010.

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