



Cherokee Nation Educator Lives Her Teachings

It's one thing for Cherokee Nation Public Health Educators to teach others about tobacco cessation and the importance of cancer prevention. It's another thing to speak straight from experience, which is what Mary Owl has had to do.

There was something different about Mary Owl when she accepted a job with the Cherokee Nation Healthy Nation program – she was a smoker. Now, in her new position, she was going to have to educate others about the importance of not smoking and offer classes and tips on how to stop. Part of that teaching was going to involve explaining about cancer prevention efforts. It was a subject she new a lot about.

“I started smoking when I was 13,” she said. “It was peer pressure that got me started.”

Owl said she went away to a boarding school back then and the first day her new friends asked her if she smoked. Not wanting to be an outcast, she said yes. For over a decade she smoked one cigarette a day. She wanted to stop when she was ready to have children, and managed to not smoke while expecting; but after each of her children were born, she would start up again. The stress of life caused her to increase to an average of one-half pack per day.

When she got the job with Cherokee Nation, she went to group's tobacco cessation class. Even with all of that support, she still found the addiction too strong and quitting was difficult, even though she had lost a son to cancer. Then, she too was diagnosed with cancer.

“I knew my body needed to be as healthy as possible if I was going to be going through chemotherapy,” she said. “My faith was a tremendous incentive.”

Mary has now been smoke-free for more than a year now. She is still receiving treatments for her cancer but it is in remission and she is doing much better. She is also sharing her story with others and encouraging them to get the help they need to stop. She also can share the dangers of starting smoking first hand with others.

“I always tell young people to never start and then they never have to try to stop,” she said. “It is so difficult to quit, and it is best to never have that first cigarette to begin with.”



Owl said if you are a smoker who needs help quitting, call 1-800- QUIT NOW and sign up for a Cherokee Nation Healthy Nation tobacco cessation class.

“We are here to help,” she said.

Written by June Maher, Cherokee Nation Healthy Nation