

“Let’s go to the roof!!” my cousin yelled. As a nine year old, I was excited to go on the roof of my grandparent’s house in Syria. We stomped up the stairs, laughing and screaming as we barged onto the open expanse on the third floor of the building. I was taken aback by the view, amazed by how far I could see. Beautiful buildings and green grass stretched out as far as I could see. I felt so small compared to the world around me. Syria was so beautiful, before the war led to the deterioration and rubble that has become today.

As we stood there soaking in the view, a flash of orange caught the corner of my eye. I looked down and saw a cigarette blunt lying on the floor, still emitting smoke.

“Who smokes in this family?” I remember asking incredulously.

“No one,” my great uncle responded abruptly. I didn’t even see him come up. “Pedestrians throw the cigarettes on the roof when they’re done with them,” he said.

I had no reason to distrust him, so I took his word for it. But as the days went on, I started to question exactly how someone could throw a half-lit cigarette three stories high. I was young, but I knew how to think for myself. So I decided to take matters into my own hands. One day, I decided to go up on the roof and investigate. Tiptoeing up the stairs, I slowly pried the door open, being careful to not make any noise.

The sight before my eyes was the last thing I expected, yet it made sense. I knew in the back of my mind that it was true, and I just didn’t want to believe it. In front of me stood my great uncle, with a lit cigarette between his fingers. Those cigarette blunts were his.

That was the first time I found out that he was battling a smoking addiction. He started smoking because his friends did it, and it helped him escape his problems, not realizing that it would cause him more problems in the future. My dad endlessly tried to get his uncle to quit, but to no avail. Even after explaining how it would affect him medically, my great uncle was not ready to give up smoking a pack of cigarettes a day.

A few years later, we got a phone call from my grandparents. They told us that my great uncle had lung cancer, and there was not much that could be done at that point. We were in America and they were still in Syria, and there was no way for us to fly down because of the war. The last time we saw him was the same summer I learned that he was a smoker. The pain of losing my great uncle was a lot to handle, and I could only imagine what my dad was going through.

My dad is a lung doctor, with most of his patients being smokers who developed lung cancer. He was no stranger to the reality of smoking, but it still came as a shock because it was his own uncle. He tried to stay detached from his patients while also caring for them to the best of his abilities, but this was not something that he could stay detached from. Every day that he went to work he was reminded of how important our lungs are, and he tried his best to help other people have a chance at life.

Grieving the loss of a loved one, especially when you are in another country from the rest of your family, is not easy. I was not that close to him, but it affected my dad greatly, and thus affected me. It hit our entire family as a shock. It has been years since, yet lung cancer is still something that is on the back of our minds at all times. Almost 90% of lung cancer cases are

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from past smokers, and it is a problem that resonates deeply with me because there is action that can be taken to decrease the number of cases. I know that I want to prevent others from going through that same experience, and educate others on the dangers of smoking. It sparked something inside me—I knew that it didn't end with me and I had to do my part in helping others.

Fast forward to my sophomore year of high school, where I learned about an organization in my city called the Chairman and Mayor's Youth Leadership Council. As a high school student who was passionate about creating change in my community, I immediately applied to become a part of this council. The theme of the year was centered around smoking and vaping, since we had a partnership with the Winnebago County Health Department. According to the CDC, smoking is the leading cause of preventable death in America, with an attributed 480,000 deaths annually, and it was something that we wanted to make an active effort to address.

At first, we wanted to combat the use of e-cigarettes in indoor places, but there was a state-wide ban on that in action already, so we had to change course. We then decided to work on prohibiting the use of cigarettes and e-cigarettes at outdoor events in my city by changing the event application form. The effects of secondhand smoke, especially on children, can lead to many health issues, and we were passionate about taking the first steps to combat this. This project took us two years, as we ran into a lot of different obstacles, but after much hard work, we finally got an opportunity to present our proposal to City Council.

"We hope you will find our concern for the wellbeing of citizens in our community, especially the youth, to be as reasonable as we do. Thank you again for your time and allowing us to present here today," I ended off our presentation to City Council. It was followed with an overwhelming round of applause. After a few questions from aldermen, they all voiced their approval for our efforts, and promised to help put our plan into action. We had done it. The project that we had been working on for two years was finally coming to fruition.

While the city of Rockford is not the biggest city, every small action matters, and I hope this cause can expand to the entire county, the state, and eventually the country. I will continue to advocate for increased education among all individuals, to improve the health and well-being of everyone. For me, spreading awareness of lung cancer risks goes hand in hand with educating people about the detrimental effects of smoking. I have always been passionate about staying healthy, and I have been able to begin addressing the issue in my community through that lens, and I hope to continue doing that to the best of my abilities. Understanding the relationship between smoking and lung cancer cases can also lead to action to help address cases early on, such as more smokers getting screened before the cancer has spread to other parts of their bodies. Addressing the problem at its root cause—smoking—can help prevent many cases, and can lessen the effects and risks of lung cancer if it is contracted.

I am currently pursuing an economics degree at DePaul University, with a minor in Applied Diplomacy, and I want to use my education to solve social issues and have a positive impact on the world. Understanding the connections between economics and politics is invaluable to addressing current problems in America, and it can provide me with a unique

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background that will allow me to enact reform. Although I hope to become a lawyer, I also want to run for public office in the future, implementing policies to help solve problems in this country. And who knows? Maybe I'll even run for president someday. All I know is that I will continue to work on improving the world around me, so that it is a place where everyone is able to breathe freely—today, tomorrow, and always.