



Gruen Von Behrens
Oral Cancer Survivor
Nationally-known Motivational Speaker

Gruen Von Behrens was just 13 and on a camp-out with friends when one pulled out a can of snuff he'd stolen from his father's dresser drawer. "I thought, 'Why not?'" he said. "I was 13. I had not a care in the world. So I took a dip." "At first it made me kind of sick and real dizzy. Next thing I knew I was addicted."

By age 14 Gruen was seriously hooked on nicotine. At his peak he was consuming more than half a can a day. Then it happened, at sixteen he noticed a small white spot on his tongue, a spot that would gradually start to grow and eat away at his tongue. Gruen was slowly beginning to realize that he likely had cancer. He decided to hide it from his mother, a nurse. The 5'10" ball-player recalls sitting in the bathroom asking God why this was happening to him.

"As a teenager, [Gruen] was a handsome lad who hit .400 for the local Comets and wanted to play for the Chicago Cubs. Ryne Sandberg was his hero. 'The only things I cared about were baseball, food, and women, in that order,' he said. At the high school field he still can point out the houses in the neighborhood beyond the center-field fence that he hit with home runs."

When his mother kept asking why he was slurring his speech, drooling, and why he couldn't seem to keep food in his mouth he'd tell her that it was his wisdom teeth. His mom would discover the truth when she surprised him with a visit to the dentist's office. According to the Gazette story, "once in the dentist's chair and about to be put under anesthesia, [Gruen] admitted the truth.' It's not my wisdom teeth, I have cancer,' he said, as the dentist peeked into his mouth. The dentist nodded to his mother." Gruen had squamous cell carcinoma.

"I've never seen my mom cry like that," Gruen recalls. "It ripped her heart out." Doctors gave him a 25% chance of survival going into his first surgery. "At 17, you're not supposed to think about life and death issues," he said.

One week later a 17 year-old boy would undergo 13 hours of surgery followed by a month of recovery in the hospital. Then came the radiation treatments. Within six weeks he'd lose 70 pounds, lose the skin on his face, his mouth would become a blistering white mess and his teeth would rot.

Now 40 operations later at age 27, his lower face severely disfigured, his lower teeth and jawbone gone, half his tongue and neck muscle missing, his face patched with skin and muscle from his leg, Gruen pleads with all who'll listen, "don't do it, it ruined my life."

In slurred speech in crowded school gymnasiums across the nation he tells students, "I know I'm a little hard to understand, so you're going to have to bear with me and listen." "This isn't a mask I can take off and throw in the closet. I'm like this 365 days a year."

As part of his efforts Gruen has spoken to approximately 2 million children in all 50 states and all 10 Canadian provinces about the dangers of tobacco.