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Times photos by Kimm Anderson,
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John Weber speaks frankly about his lung cancer Thursday to students at Kimball High School in an effort to persuade them not to smoke like he did. Weber has created T-shirts, posters and billboards.

25 October, 2003

John Weber has lung cancer and wants you to know why

Kate Kompas

Staff Writer

John Weber smiles as he approaches the cashier at Perkins. He proudly shows her his T-shirt, which has an illustration of his lungs and the large, inoperable tumor above them.

"This is me. This is inside me," he explains.

The cashier looks confused and asks him if he's going to get it taken out. Weber shakes his head: No, it can't come out.

"I'm sorry," the cashier said.

"Me too," Weber laughs.

Weber, 60, is on a mission. The self-described recluse is putting his most personal business -- his health -- on billboards and T-shirts throughout Central Minnesota. Weber, who lives in Long Prairie, is trying to spread the message he ignored for most of his life: Smoking has dire health consequences.

Weber was told Feb. 20 he had lung cancer and an inoperable tumor. Even before he was told, he knew. He brought along a book -- he can't remember which one, but probably a mystery novel -- to help pass time in the waiting room until his appointment. But now, looking back, he was using that waiting room time to prepare for the worst.

Weber has a good relationship with his doctor, Xin Wang of the Coborn Cancer Center.

"When I saw his face, I knew I was in trouble," Weber said.

"I wasn't scared and I wasn't angry," Weber said. "I was sad because of all the people I would miss."

Weber started smoking when he was 11 because a friend was doing it. He would smoke for the next 49 years, never more than a pack a day. He quit about a year before he was diagnosed because he was getting emphysema and couldn't do athletic activities.

If he hadn't been in such good physical condition when diagnosed, he probably wouldn't have made it through treatment, he said.

Weber doesn't shirk his responsibility. He doesn't feel like a victim, but he is angry with the tobacco companies for marketing a potentially deadly product.

Weber remembers watching "The Hit Parade" when he was young and seeing ads for



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The first cigarette he smoked was a Lucky Strike.

"Today, 49 years later, I still remember the damn jingle," he said.

Treatment is hell

Weber's treatment lasted for seven weeks, five days a week of radiation, plus one day of chemotherapy. When he talks to students at area schools, which he just started doing, he doesn't mince words: "I say, 'Do you know what treatment's like? Boil a cup of water and drink it.'"

Weber sent a journal he kept of his treatments to friends so they would know what was happening. The passages reflect Weber's biting sense of humor. Here is an excerpt:

"Well, one week has passed in treatment. I have had 5 radiation treatments. Once the coordinates of what they want to zap are configured these are 5 minutes. I have had one chemo cocktail (stirred not shaken a la Bond). This takes a few hours. So far no bad reactions from either. ... Each week I will have 5 zaps and one drink. I know how to have a good time."

Weber's cancer is in remission, but he knows the odds are he will die within a few years.

He's using what's left of his time to educate people about smoking. That's where the billboards, T-shirts and talks at schools come in.

Weber says he's been blunt and honest with the kids he's talked to so far. He knows it's not an easy thing to do, trying to persuade teen-agers to not smoke. He says he probably wouldn't have listened to anyone who told him not to smoke when he was their age.

"I tell them two reasons not to smoke," Weber said. "Number 1, you're important. And Number 2, (the tobacco companies) are messing with you."

Weber said he's not asking for a lot. He tells the students, "I just want one of you not to smoke."

Dawn Burma, chemical health consultant for the Kimball school district, said Weber helps students put a face on lung cancer. Weber talked to Kimball students earlier this week.

"We do a lot of educating kids about the dangers of using tobacco, but what's missing is the ability for kids to personalize it and make it more real for them," Burma said. "At that age, they still think they are invincible."

Delivering the message to teens is crucial, Burma said.

"Ninety percent of Americans who smoke are addicted by the age of 19," she said. If they get anti-tobacco education early enough, "by the time they're out of high school chances are they will never start using tobacco."

His mission

Weber said he has spent a couple thousand dollars of his own money on T-shirts bearing an image of his chest scan, as well as the billboards with the same image. One billboard along Minnesota Highway 10 is already up; two more, including one that will be by Minnesota Highway 15 and Third Street, soon will appear. He sells the T-shirts for \$10 each. He said he will continue traveling to schools to speak as long as his health holds out.

He's been so busy lately with speaking and other duties that Weber hasn't had much free time to relax at his home near Long Prairie. He lives simply there, splitting wood for cooking and relying on solar energy. For at least 10 years of his life, the former licensed psychologist didn't use any electricity and used only kerosene lamps.

That's one of his regrets, he says with a smile: He won't live long enough to see the energy crisis that he has long predicted.

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Weber said he is thankful for his friends, including his partner, Kathy, who he said has given him strength in his fight.

As he said in the last line of his treatment journal: "In a world that seems so crazy and hurtful, the kindness shown (to) me by so many simply shines."

On the Net

For information on John Weber, visit his Web site at www.rea-alp.com/~dragnfly.

In Minnesota

Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer death in Minnesota for men and women and has one of the poorest prognoses of any cancer, according to the Minnesota Department of Health.

Each year in Minnesota, about 2,400 men and women develop lung cancer, and 2,300 die from it. The majority of lung cancer cases are tobacco-related, according to the health department.

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