

About Health TV with Jeanne Blake
I Can't Breathe: Pam Laffin's story
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JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to *About Health* TV. I'm Jeanne Blake. Nearly two million Americans suffer from emphysema, a chronic lung disease for which there is currently no cure. Doctors say that most cases of emphysema are the direct result of smoking cigarettes. In this edition of *About Health* we are going to learn about emphysema from a young woman who knows too well what it is like to live with the disease. Her name is Pam Laffin and she is a spokesperson currently for the Massachusetts Department of Health anti-tobacco campaign. And Pam, you are in those six powerful campaigns currently on television and I'm sure that people will recognize you. Welcome, and thank you for joining us.

PAM: Well, thank you.

JEANNE BLAKE: Why don't you tell us, because you're probably better equipped than anybody, what emphysema is.

PAM: OK. Well, in our lungs we have little air sacs, tiny little air sacs, and the air sacs exchange oxygen for carbon dioxide. What I mean is, they take in oxygen, which is released in the bloodstream, and at the same time it releases carbon dioxide, which is the used-up air in our lungs. When a person has emphysema, several of the air sacs are broken, which means that no oxygen can get in and no carbon dioxide can get out. Carbon dioxide continues to fill up these air sacs, and so the lungs become enlarged and they lose their elasticity. Most people who have healthy lungs breathe in, breathe out. People with emphysema, they've lost that elasticity in their lungs and they're just like big sponges and they don't work as well.

JEANNE BLAKE: The doctors say that they believe they are not certain what causes emphysema, but it is directly related to cigarette smoking. You started smoking very early in your life.

PAM: Yeah. One doctor offered an opinion that because I started smoking so young – I started smoking when I was 10 – my lungs weren't fully developed and I started to destroy them before they were done, and that may be the reason that I got sick so young, I developed emphysema so young. But

fortunately, they've been looking for emphysema more and more in younger people, people who more normally would have been diagnosed with severe asthma, and they've been looking for emphysema and they've been finding it. People in their 30s.

JEANNE BLAKE: Now, some people, I think, would look at someone like you and say, "Boy, that's a real anomaly," and I bet a lot of young people would look at you and say, "There must have been something wrong anyway. There must have been a genetic type predisposition." Have you been tested for that?

PAM: Yes, I've been tested. In fact most of my family were tested with CNA for a predisposition to emphysema and they found nothing.

JEANNE BLAKE: So this truly is that you think this is a direct result of your cigarette smoking?

PAM: I think that it's a direct result of the cigarette smoking, and my doctors also think the same thing.

JEANNE BLAKE: How long did you smoke cigarettes?

PAM: I smoked cigarettes for 14 years. I started when I was 10 and I quit when I was diagnosed with emphysema when I was 24.

JEANNE BLAKE: Why do you think you started smoking at 10? Were your friends smoking?

PAM: No. I started smoking all alone in my basement, and I know exactly why I started smoking. When I was 9, I saw the movie "Grease," and at the end of the movie, the character Sandy decides that being a good girl isn't going to keep her boyfriend or make her any friends so she decided to get some black tight things, get her hair all curled, and smoke. And I'll tell you, at 9 years old, I made my mother take me out and get me a perm so that I could have the curly hair, and I thought about it and thought about it until I was 10, and by the time I was 10 I was smoking.

JEANNE BLAKE: Did you like cigarettes? When you first started, it was the image that you wanted?

PAM: When I first started smoking, it was the image. Cigarettes made me feel sick to my stomach, made me cough, made my eyes water, made me dizzy, but I would do anything to have that, you know,

“bad girl” image, so I continued smoking until I didn’t get sick anymore and I didn’t think about it anymore.

JEANNE BLAKE: Pam, at what point did you start feeling symptoms? Did you know that something was wrong? Did you know that something was wrong with your lungs?

PAM: Well, when I was 21, I started to develop chronic bronchitis. I got bronchitis four times in that year. And the third time that I had bronchitis and every time after that since, I also had bronchial asthma, and I also noticed that around the time I was 21, I was having trouble taking groceries up the stairs into my home and I figured that, you know, I wasn’t a kid anymore, I wasn’t a teenager anymore, and these things are bound to happen. So I really believed that it was my age that was causing my health problems. When I was 23 I was diagnosed with chronic asthma, because at first with the infection, I would have asthma problems when I had a lung infection. But after a while, I would have asthma even when I didn’t have an infection. And so it got really very severe and I needed to use an asthma inhaler every four hours and I couldn’t leave home without it.

JEANNE BLAKE: Then it was actually another three years before you were diagnosed for the first time that you were feeling those later series of symptoms that it gave more time to do more damage, didn’t it?

PAM: Yes. It progressed very quickly from chronic bronchitis to emphysema in just a few years. When I was 24, I had what I thought was a severe asthma attack and I went to the hospital and I was diagnosed then with emphysema.

JEANNE BLAKE: Did you know what it was? Did you know what they were telling you?

PAM: Yeah, well, about a year before, my primary care doctor had told me that on one of my x-rays he saw something that looked like emphysema. This was when I was 23. He said he wasn’t sure, because it’s really hard to tell on an x-ray, almost impossible to see it on an x-ray. And so I think I went into my denial process then, because I said, “Well, I’m 23. There’s no way I have emphysema,” and he said he can’t really tell on an x-ray anyway, so I really chose not to believe him. I did, however, start to try to quit smoking.

JEANNE BLAKE: You did, so you knew what it meant. You knew what its potential implications

were.

PAM: Yes, I knew.

JEANNE BLAKE: What finally got you to quit?

PAM: When I was 24 and I was diagnosed with emphysema, a doctor who was at the hospital, and I don't remember who he was, he was the house doctor, he said that I could keep smoking if I wanted to, but if I did, I would be dead before I was 30 and they wouldn't be able to do anything to help me. So when I'm 30, my older daughter will be 13, and I think that that's about the time kids need their parents the most, and I thought it would be pretty selfish if I didn't quit smoking. And so I made the decision then that I wouldn't smoke anymore.

JEANNE BLAKE: Was it difficult to quit?

PAM: Yeah. I was in the hospital for three weeks, the first three weeks that I was trying to quit smoking, so that may have made it a little easier. However, I cried a lot and I yelled at people a lot and I slept a lot. And I always did have the fear in the back of my head that, you know, any time I could slip downstairs to the main entrance and no one would notice, I could bum a cigarette off of somebody at the entrance. I mean, nobody down there knew what I was in the hospital for, so, you know, there was always that possibility that I could do that, so I had to keep on top of my cravings.

JEANNE BLAKE: You had a lung transplant. How many years after your diagnosis did you have a lung transplant?

PAM: I had a lung transplant a year later, when I was 25, and everything was going really well for a couple of years, until last summer I thought I was home-free. I have some swelling in my face due to the steroid medication that I have to take, and they had really deferred my medication so much that the swelling in my face was gone, had gone away, and I felt really good. I mean, by feeling good, I didn't feel as healthy as a regular healthy person, but I felt better than I had ever remembered feeling in a long time, and I thought that maybe I was ready to move on with my life. I had a medical procedure called a bronchoscopy for a yearly checkup, and during this bronchoscopy they found some signs of rejection, meaning that my body was rejecting the donor lung, and so over this past year I had a lot of procedures to try to combat the rejection and get back for a healthy donor lung, but unfortunately they weren't able to

get rid of the rejection, so now I have signs of rejection and I think I'm sicker now than I was before the transplant.

JEANNE BLAKE: And you're on the waiting list for a new lung.

PAM: Actually, I'm not even on the waiting list. According to my team of doctors, whom I trust very much, I'm not healthy enough right now to withstand surgery, to live through the surgery, and so they have to wait until I build up some strength. So I'm going through pulmonary rehab to try to build up some physical strength so that I will be able to survive the surgery. Once I'm done with pulmonary rehab, they'll assess my progress and they'll decide then whether or not to put me on the waiting list for a transplant.

JEANNE BLAKE: So the possibility exists that they will never find you well enough for a transplant.

PAM: Yes, there's that possibility.

JEANNE BLAKE: I see. I don't know if it's showing on camera, but I can see you laboring to breathe, and other than that you look perfectly healthy.

PAM: I am breathing with different muscles than other people do, which is another thing I would learn, if I would learn to breathe with my diaphragm muscle like everybody else does. I breathe with my shoulders and my back muscles. That's harder, to breathe with those muscles than with your diaphragm.

JEANNE BLAKE: So you're aware of every breath that you take?

PAM: Yes, I'm aware.

JEANNE BLAKE: And exhausting, I would imagine.

PAM: By the end of the day, my muscles hurt so much from just breathing and my back always hurts, because my back muscles are doing a lot of the pushing of the lungs to make me breathe, so it's exhausting and very painful by the end of the day.

JEANNE BLAKE: Now, what other ways does this disease impact your life?

PAM: In every possible way. This disease has taken away my independence. I'm dependent on my family, and my mother has been a life-saver. When I have an infection and I'm really sick I can barely make it to the bathroom myself. I need people to cook for me and bring me my food, and I can't clean my house, and my children pretty much have to take care of themselves and sometimes they have to take care of me. I can't walk long distances, so if I'm going to the mall or I'm going to a movie theater, my kids have to push me in a wheelchair or whoever is with me has to push me in a wheelchair. I lost my youth. I'm 29 years old and I think I should be healthy and think I should be enjoying my children and looking forward to my future. I've lost the guarantee that I am going to have a future. I have high blood pressure, so I can't eat certain foods. I mean, I know it doesn't seem like a big loss, but when you can't have Chinese food, it becomes something that you really want. I've lost friends through this, because a lot of times when you're sick, people don't know what to say to you, so they just stop calling you. I have no social life, because, you know, I used to go into clubs and hang out in the Boston area, and I can't do that anymore because of smoking and people banging into each other and it's crowded and I can't be in a crowded place, so I've lost my social life. This disease has affected everything that I do. Every person in my life has been affected.

JEANNE BLAKE: I guess it would be fair to say that you're probably very angry about it too.

PAM: I can't say that I'm angry, because I've accepted my life the way it is. I was angry at first. My children, on the other hand, are extremely angry about all of this. And that makes them feel confused and upset, because they don't want to be angry at me for being sick, but they are angry at me for the way their lives have turned out, and they are angry at the tobacco companies, and they are angry with people who smoke in movies, and they're just very angry with the whole situation.

JEANNE BLAKE: When was the last time one of them said something, for example, that you can share with us?

PAM: Well, this morning there was a driver waiting outside for me to come out --

JEANNE BLAKE: For "Good Morning, America"?

PAM: Yes. And my daughter had, at ten minutes of six in the morning, got dressed and took my

wheelchair outside for him to put into his trunk, and she came back in and she said, "He's a smoker." They don't like people who smoke. He smoked outside of the car and told me it was an addiction, and I don't hold anything against smokers but my kids do. Unfortunately, if they bring the smoking anywhere around me, or they see the corner store has Marlboro all over the store, and the kids get mad about that because they go in there for candy, and obviously Marlboro has them think they want to smoke, and so things like that upset them. When people smoke in movies I tell them when it's character development or gratuitous smoking. When it's gratuitous smoking, they get angry, they say, "Why bother? What's the point?"

JEANNE BLAKE: When you see children smoke, what's your personal reaction?

PAM: I feel so sad when I see kids smoking. And I know they think that it's smoking and they're talking really loud and they're swearing ... I know they think they're being really cool and that they're more appealing than they really are. But they really look like little babies with bad mouths and it makes me so sad.

JEANNE BLAKE: You can project your own experience on that, and you must want to talk with each one of them. You did go to school to learn to speak, didn't you?

PAM: I did. I don't talk to people on the street who are smoking, but I go to schools. I talk to people in cessation groups who are trying to quit. I try to get to as many schools in the state as I can.

JEANNE BLAKE: What's it like when you're standing in front of a group? What are the questions you hear most often?

PAM: Most often I hear, Why didn't I stop smoking when I first started getting sick? Did I smoke when I was pregnant? Did I ever smoke anything else? Because I think that they want to hear that I smoked some horrible drug and that's what really did it and not the smoking. They wanted to know if I had a predisposition to emphysema. They wanted to know how many packs of cigarettes I smoked a day and what kind. I think what they want to hear there is that I smoked about five packs of non-filtered Lucky's, you know?

JEANNE BLAKE: Anything that they can do to separate themselves from what you're experiencing.

PAM: Yeah. I think that they're trying to hear something that they're not doing so it won't be them who gets sick.

JEANNE BLAKE: And what message do you always have in your mind that you certainly want to leave behind, if there's a one-liner that you want to leave with these kids whom you speak to?

PAM: I just have that if they are smoking or thinking they might like to smoke, just to take two minutes out their lives, which is a very short amount of time, and think about the things they want out of their lives. For instance, where they want to go, what they want to be, anyone they want to meet, anything like that, and think if it's worth giving up to smoke, because if you smoke you can get sick and all of those dreams can be lost.

JEANNE BLAKE: Do you ever hear from young people to whom you've spoken out of school?

PAM: Sometimes I get e-mails from kids who I had spoken to at their schools and sometimes I get letters and cards from kids, and they're always very positive and that they had no idea that anyone could get so sick so young, that if anyone tries to make them smoke they'll think of me and they'll say no. You know, the younger kids.

JEANNE BLAKE: So you feel as though you're having a positive impact?

PAM: I feel that way. I hope so. There is really no way for me to tell, especially when I speak and I walk away and I hear from some of them once then go on with their lives, and who knows what happens, but I have to believe that I'm doing some good.

JEANNE BLAKE: Being featured in those public service announcements has certainly, I'm sure, taken away a lot of your anonymity. Has it? Listen to me, I'm certain, but has it?

PAM: Yes. People do recognize me. They know who I am from the ads, but I did an ad a few years ago and something happened. When the ads died down, the celebrity died down with it. I imagine that will happen again. So I just hang on and wait.

JEANNE BLAKE: It's not all that bad, generally. I imagine they're pretty supportive, aren't they?

PAM: Right. People are so sweet. People are very nice. So, you know, it's not all that – I just don't always know what to say to people, because I'm just a regular person.

JEANNE BLAKE: Why did you decide to take part in this ad, knowing how incredibly visible you would be for this six-week period of time?

PAM: Well, that it's an important message, and when my rejection last year started to become symptomatic – I mean, I was diagnosed with rejection in August and wasn't symptomatic until October – I had to stop my touring schools. I wasn't sure if I would feel well enough to do school tours this year and I want still to get the message out ... an even more important message now, because before I had this transplant and I'm OK, but then I had all these side effects from medication. I was so worried about side effects from medication, so what, now I have a more important message since I had the transplant, and maybe even I started thinking that it was a cure but it wasn't. Now I'm sicker. I need to get this message out to as many people as I possibly can.

JEANNE BLAKE: We have copies of the public service announcements, and let's take a look at one, Pam, one of the most effective, and then we'll talk about this after we watch it.

[VIDEO CLIP]

PAM'S DAUGHTER: All my friends say, "Oh, I want to be like my mom when I grow up," and I can't say that, because if I said that they would think that I mean I want to start smoking when I'm 10. If I was to smoke, I think I would die, because I tried smoking for a while to feel like what my mom feels like, and I can't do it. They made me sick.

[END CLIP]

JEANNE BLAKE: Pam, you selected that one first and watched it again. I think it's somewhat obvious why you feel so special about that PSA. What are you hoping to accomplish with that one?

PAM: Well, I want people to know that these are aimed toward adults. What I've been doing speaking for the past four years or so has all been aimed at kids, and this is aimed at adults. I want them to understand that it's aimed at them. Look at my daughter, who I hurt deeply, and I've hurt her life so deeply by every decision that I made when I was her age. And maybe a mother can look at my life and

say, "This could be me. This could my child."

JEANNE BLAKE: What do you think that the impact will be on young people who see this? It appears to me as though, if a teenager sees this, there will be an emotional impact that might resonate with them.

PAM: Well, I hope and I feel that I'm a younger person than who you would expect to see in some of these ads, and who people have seen in some of these ads. And I'm still not closer to their age, and I'm saying teenagers want, I don't know if they want children, if they want to go to college, if they want to get a job and have a life and get married, that maybe they'll see that right as I was beginning to see my life, it just got cut off, all of my hopes and dreams. Maybe they'll see that some of their decisions affect other people besides themselves. When I was still smoking, even though I heard about lung disease and heart diseases, cancer, you know, when I was 14, 15 and I learned about those things in school, I continued to smoke and I laughed it off. After all, it's my life and who cares? It's nobody else's business. But it is everybody else's business, because now my mother had to give up her life the way it was because I had to move in with her so she could take care of me, and my children have no chance at a normal childhood because I smoked, and, you know, everyone around me has been affected, so it's not just their business if they're going to smoke, it's everybody's business. Everybody around them, and even people that they don't know, with their second-hand smoke.

JEANNE BLAKE: Right. Well, I know that one of your goals is to help people quit who are already smoking, so let's give the 800 number. The telephone number that you can call if you would like to stop smoking is 1-800-TRYTOSTOP. Before the campaign began, the Try to Stop hotline was getting 100 calls within a three-week noncommercial period, and in the first three weeks of the campaign the hotline received over 1,000 calls. So I think you deserve the credit for at least causing that positive impact on people's motivation to quit. And hopefully, God willing, a percentage of those will succeed at that.

PAM: I'm glad that this campaign and I got people to start thinking about quitting. It's the first step.

JEANNE BLAKE: You're a brave woman, and we wish you the very, very, very best. And we hope that your therapy with your lungs goes well and that you are able to be strong.

PAM: Thank you.

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