

An Oral Health America Program



NATIONAL SPIT TOBACCO EDUCATION PROGRAM

Gruen Von Behrens

"Spit tobacco has ruined my life. Every time I turn around, they are putting me in the hospital either to have surgery or some kind of treatment. If I had known then what I know now, I never would have put a dip in my mouth. Spit tobacco seemed harmless, but in reality it was more than I could handle," says Gruen Von Behrens. **Gruen Von Behrens** is a 25-year-old oral cancer survivor who has endured almost 30 painful and disfiguring surgeries to save his life, including one radical surgery that removed half his neck muscles, lymph nodes and 1/3 of his tongue. Like too many teenagers, Gruen first tried spit tobacco at age 13 to "fit in." Growing up in a rural farming community, spit tobacco use was too often the norm. What began as an effort to be "cool" during a camping trip with friends, resulted in a powerful addiction that affected his life in a way he never imagined. By age 17, he was diagnosed with squamous cell carcinoma, a common form of oral cancer. Where do kids get this idea? Macho, rugged and carefully-crafted tobacco advertisements have played a large role in spit tobacco use among minors. The tobacco industry touts its spit tobacco products as a "safer alternative to cigarettes," but Gruen will be the first to tell you that just isn't so. This Stewardson, Illinois native now travels on behalf of Oral Health America's National Spit Tobacco Education Program (NSTEP) and shares with the public the real life consequences of his own spit tobacco use. He is especially effective with young audiences, warning them to stay away from the spit tobacco that he believes caused his cancer. Gruen accompanied NSTEP to Minor League Baseball games during the summer of 2002 to speak to fans about his previous spit tobacco use and how his on-going struggle with oral cancer has affected his life. His story is not only emotionally touching, but also visually effective in relating this important and oftentimes overlooked public health message.

To request an appearance, please contact Melissa Hoebbel @ 312-836-9900