

Statement of

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“Smokeless Tobacco: Impact on the Health of our Nation's Youth
and Use in Major League Baseball”

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Chairman Pallone and distinguished Members of the House Energy and Commerce Health Subcommittee, good morning. My name is Gruen Von Behrens, and I am a resident of Stewardson, IL. I am a survivor of oral cancer from smokeless tobacco use, and I travel throughout the country speaking to young people about the health risks of smokeless and spit tobacco use. I serve on the speakers bureau for NSTEP® (the National Spit Tobacco Education Program) of Oral Health America, a national non-profit organization dedicated to improving the nation’s oral health. I join my colleagues, including former NSTEP Chairman, Joe Garagiola, in speaking up about the devastating effect that smokeless tobacco can have.

I wish to thank the Committee for bringing this important, but overlooked health issue to the table. So much attention is paid to the health effects of smoking. Smokeless tobacco is not “harmless” as advertising would have you believe. It has ruined my life. I am 32-years-old, and I have experienced 34 surgeries, including one radical surgery that removed half of my neck muscles, lymph nodes and a third of my tongue.

I first tried smokeless tobacco at age 13 to “fit in” on a camping trip. I grew up in a rural farming community where smokeless tobacco use is everywhere. My first experience with smokeless tobacco resulted in a powerful addiction that affected my life

in a way I never imagined. Back then, I hit a .400 for the local Comets baseball club, and I wanted to play for the Chicago Cubs when I grew up. Baseball was the center of my world. But as much as I loved baseball, smokeless tobacco was my biggest habit. I had to have it in my lip when I was playing baseball. I liked the way it made me feel and I liked the way it tasted. The risks didn't worry me. We all know that smoking can cause lung cancer, but tobacco advertising fools people into thinking that smokeless tobacco is harmless. It didn't occur to me that I would get cancer—that just happened to old people.

When I was 17-years-old, I was diagnosed with squamous cell carcinoma. The cancer in my mouth spread. Doctors told me there was an 80 percent chance I was going to die. You can not imagine how this news affected my mom. The first surgery lasted 13 hours. This was followed by a painful round of radiation, which finally broke my addiction to smokeless tobacco. After radiation I thought my cancer was over but I had another 33 surgeries to go. Before, there were colleges that were interested in me. But at 17, my baseball days were over.

Anyone who tells you that they can't or won't stop using smokeless tobacco is an addict. I have spoken to professional baseball players who hate the fact that they use it, are scared that what happened to me will happen to them, and still have to fight their addiction. The most important thing we can do is to prevent young people from starting to use, and to help users quit.

I am honored to share my story with you, a story that I have shared with over 2 million youth across the country. Please keep my testimony, and those of others you heard today, close to your hearts as you consider steps to improving America's health. Smokeless tobacco is not harmless, and I ask you to promote smokeless tobacco

education and cessation, encourage policies that limit the ways that tobacco companies reach youth through advertising and promotion of this highly addictive and harmful drug.

It is not a safe alternative to smoking.

Thank you for your time.