



My Visit with Big Tobacco by Janice Ross

In May of this year, I found myself in a very unlikely place. As an oncology nurse and daughter of two lung cancer patients, I found myself attending the shareholder's meeting for Reynolds American International (RAI). RAI is the manufacturer of Camel and Natural American Spirit cigarettes and Grizzly chewing tobacco, just a few of their products. As a member of the Nightingales Nurses, I was representing the thousands of oncology nurses and cancer patients affected by tobacco use. Nightingales Nurses is a group of nurse activists who work to focus public attention on the behavior of the tobacco industry and its contribution to the preventable epidemic of tobacco-caused disease and death.

I arrived in Winston-Salem, NC late the night before the meeting. Two other Nightingales picked me up at the airport and drove me around to show me where we would be. We drove past the Winston Café, the Camel Pawn Shop and the Salem Funeral Home and Crematory. The Reynolds America buildings were tall with large neon red letters at the top. Heavy fog had rolled in and gave the buildings an ominous, even evil look as if Disney had designed the city as a set. Barricades were already in place to thwart traffic and control any protesters. The levels of well orchestrated intimidation had already started.

Arriving at the building the next morning, uniformed police met us on the sidewalk and inquired if we were attending the shareholder's meeting. Inside the building we first walked up to the registration desk where our ID was checked. I carried a proxy of another shareholder for entrance to the meeting, but the registrars already knew my name and that I carried the proxy. We were handed an entrance ticket to the meeting and the rules of order established for the meeting. The next stop was at a purse check, where we had to turn over our cell phones, umbrellas and I was asked to remove my jacket. The jacket was not a jacket meant to thwart off bad weather, but as part of my outfit, never the less, I was required to turn over my jacket. I was given a ticket to verify that my purse had been checked and a ticket to retrieve my personal items. We were then directed to the next security checkpoint. As we passed through the large open lobby there was a large display of drinks, ice and glasses. A veteran shareholder and activist warned us not to take a drink since if we were to leave the meeting in order to go to the bathroom, no one is allowed re-entry to the meeting. At each checkpoint was an RAI identified person and at least three security people. We were guided up the stairs through a checkpoint to verify that we had an entrance ticket and a purse check ticket. The entrance to the meeting auditorium was crowded by many dark suits. We smiled and said "Good Morning" whenever we came to a new group, but the usual response was not returned with a smile. The room had about 100 chairs in theater seating. The first four rows were occupied by men and women in suits and to my surprise they all had on their jackets. I concluded my jacket must have looked threatening. There was a center aisle with a single microphone $\frac{3}{4}$ the way down the aisle. As the other Nightingale Nurses and I looked for seats we noticed that all of the center aisle seats closest to the microphone were taken. We tried to seat ourselves where we could get to the microphone when the question & answer time arrived.



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The chairperson introduced herself and started the meeting. She started by going through a list of accomplishments the company had experienced; the growth with certain cigarette lines and the growth in certain markets. The audio speaker was only a few feet away from me and the chairperson's voice was deep and monotone. The dais was high and she seemed to look down on the crowd. It was at this moment that I realized what a surreal experience I was having. Here I sat as an oncology nurse having had cancer myself, a daughter whose parents both had lung cancer, a daughter who held her mother as she died from lung cancer. For a minute I did not hear the speaker, but allowed myself to be lost in the moment. The meeting proceeded with the introduction of various division leaders and as they stood I was struck by how young some of these men and women looked.

As the meeting progressed, a gentleman raised an issue that the chairperson did not recognize as appropriate for the agenda and after an exchange of asking him to leave and he stating he had a right to bring up the issue, the man was forcibly dragged out of the meeting by six people, including a woman. He could still be heard shouting in the hallway when the doors were closed behind him. Another man tried to raise the same issue and was also escorted out of the room, but he walked on his own. I noticed that the "bouncers" had been strategically seated closest to the microphone on either side on the aisle in front of and in back on the microphone. When the time came for questions and answers only 15 minutes was allowed for both. The chairperson carefully outlined the rules for questions. Each person was to approach the microphone assistant. The assistant would hand the person a card to write down his or her name, organization and address. Each time this went slower and slower. I observed a Franciscan clergyman raise the issue of social justice in not marketing to the poor. A group of college students came to ask for action on Green Tobacco Sickness in farm workers. One of the Nightingales introduced a resolution for a commitment to not add nicotine to future products.

I wondered if I had anything to offer or could make any difference. I reached into my purse and pulled out the picture I had brought of my parents and remembered why I was there - to honor their lives and the lives of the hundreds of people with cancer that I have cared for. I got up and walked to the microphone, not clear at that moment of exactly what I might say, but I was there. As it turned out, the time allotted for questions and answers ended before I was able to get to the microphone assistant. The chairperson did not recommend voting for any of the resolutions presented and none were passed, but the number of votes for support increased from the previous year. The only time I sensed the chairperson flinch was when a Nightingales Nurse shared her research on patients' shame and guilt for developing lung cancer from smoking. The nurse asked "What do I say to a woman when she asks me who is to blame for my death?" There was no response from the chair but we did hear the message over and over again at other points in the meeting that smoking was "an adult's choice and preference". I wondered, though, how this accounted for fact that the vast majority of smokers become addicted as teenagers. I wondered how



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it squared with the company's new pretty pink and black "Camel No. 9" cigarettes, clearly targeted at young girls.

Even though I did not get the chance to speak at the microphone, I spoke just by being there. My presence as a nurse was known to big tobacco, and I bore witness to the suffering and death that these products have brought upon so many families, including my own. I plan on attending this meeting again and next time, I will be better equipped to express my message, and I will take the picture with me again. It is my hope that over time, hundreds of other nurses will join me there. Someday, when as a profession we are finally able to see the scale of this preventable disease epidemic and its corporate sources, we will be glad to have been among those who stood up against it.