

The Singing (Larry) Cowboy)

As you are watching television it immediately grabs your attention and holds it for just shy of one minute. The location is a crowded city street in New York City. Two cowboys are riding their horses together past the stopped traffic. As horns blare they get



off their horses and, as a guitar begins to play, they build a campfire right there on the asphalt. One cowboy plays the guitar and the other removes his neck scarf revealing a stoma.

The voice which begins to sing is familiar to most Laryngectomees. It is the monotone sound of an electronic artificial larynx. The lyrics are displayed at the bottom of the screen with a bouncing star following along:

You don't always die from tobacco,
Sometimes you just lose a lung.
You don't always die from tobacco,
Sometimes they just snip out your tongue.
And you won't sing worth a heck,
With a big hole in your neck,
(And the guitar playing cowboy finishes) Cuz you
don't always die from tobacco.
(Together) Cuz you don't always die from tobacco.
Cuz you don't always die from tobacco.
(And the laryngectomee finishes with) "Yippie ky
yo."

The ad concludes by showing a sign hanging from one of the horses: "Over 8.5 million Americans live with tobacco related illnesses." And written on the last few frames, "Knowledge is contagious. Infect truth.

The commercial is another of the hard-hitting anti-tobacco ads funded by The American Legacy Foundation. The Foundation was created by and receives most of its revenue from the tobacco industry as part of the 1999 Master Settlement Agreement between the industry and a coalition of attorneys general from 46 states. It provides grants to further its two goals: to keep young people from starting to smoke, and to help adults who already smoke to quit. The commercial is from TheTruth.com which is the web site for the Foundation's

program to keep young people from beginning *J* to smoke. The commercial has been nominated for close to 30 awards including two Emmys. If you have Internet access you can view the entire commercial at:

So, who IS the singing laryngectomee cowboy? He is Tommy Cook from Long Island, New York. Writing

about how the commercial came about Tommy wrote, "After living a pretty normal life again (following surgery) and getting adjusted to being a lary, I got an e-mail from a talent agency looking for help with an anti-smoking campaign. They were looking for a lary around my age to shoot a t.v. commercial. I sent them a random photo of me that my wife took.

The next day they contacted me. They wanted to set up a meeting. We met at a local diner and chatted about the concept of the commercial, (and) what they wanted me to do. We also discussed the song they wanted me to sing in the commercial, using an (artificial electronic larynx) for 'shock value'. Two days later they contacted me again stating they wanted me for the commercial!

So, in August of 2006, my wife and I went to New York City. We did the audio part first. I sang the song several times in a professional studio. This took about three hours. We had a lot of fun and I found it to be very easy and exciting. You need to know that before surgery I couldn't sing on key at all! Now, I'm in a studio singing with an (electronic artificial larynx) for a commercial to be aired around the world!

Tommy's story on becoming a laryngectomee is a familiar one. He started smoking at age 13 and was up to a three pack a day habit by age 33 when he decided to quit. At age 38 he woke up with a hoarse sounding voice. By the time it was finally diagnosed he had a large tumor and it was growing under his no longer functioning left vocal cord. Tommy wrote, "Now, time to start treatment. Two cycles of chemotherapy. They wanted to do three, but I refused the third due to the fact that the first two nearly killed me. Then forty rounds of radiation. By the end of the treatments, I lost all my hair and I was burnt



like toast. I won't tell you about all the sickness these treatments caused. I choose to forget as best I can.

So, back to the hospital for the doctor to take a good look and see if the treatments worked. A few days later, my wife and I saw him in his office for the results. He looked at us and said 'I'm sorry but the treatments you need a total laryngectomy to survive'. So in October 1998 I went back into the hospital for surgery. This was the start of my new life. The treatments had cost Tommy a 65

pound weight loss in just eight months, but he stated, "With the help of my wife and kids, over the next few years my life became almost normal again! They were my main support. You see, all of my friends jumped ship as soon as I got sick. Guess they couldn't deal with the word CANCER

The commercial has had quite an impact on Tommy. He stated, "I have received hundreds of e-mails from all over the world! E-mails from kids telling me I helped them quit or not start smoking. Some kids even stated that the commercial helped their parents quit! I also received e-mails from adults stating they shared the video with their kids and were able to convince their kids not to smoke!

Tommy wrote, "Before my surgery, I was never a singer. I never liked western movies. And I never liked going to the city! Now, I'm in a commercial singing, dressed like a cowboy, in the middle of Manhattan!"

He concluded, "Please allow me to thank some people. My wife Donna and my kids! Thanks to TheTruth and American Legacy for choosing me for the commercial And for all of the support I get from Web-Whispers! (Thanks Dutch Helms [recently deceased founder])."