

The Atlantic

The Right to Vape

LEAH SOTTILE OCT 8 2014, 10:33 AM ET

Two men in flat-billed hats and baggy t-shirts stand back-to-back on a dimly-lit stage. On cue, they bend at the waist, draw their e-cigarettes to their mouths. Wisps of smoke gather around them. And then, slowly, they straighten upward as they inhale. Finally—like human fog machines—the men blow thick, billowing clouds of bright white vapor into the air.

These guys are called “cloud chasers,” the name for e-cig hobbyists who pride themselves on blowing bigger, thicker, longer plumes of smoke.

The win goes to a guy calling himself “The Push,” who bested an entire bracket of cloud chasers during a three-hour livestreamed event in late September. The announcers, two other guys also wearing flat-billed hats, thank everyone who came out to the watch.

“Thank you very, very much,” one says. “Wanna give a big shout to ... all the companies that were out here supporting the event, supporting the cause ... the cause being *fuck Big Tobacco*.”

“*FUCK Big Tobacco*,” the other announcer concurs.

It’s a scene from [AmeraVape Technologies](#)’ cloud-chasing competition (you can watch the whole thing [here](#)) in Carlsbad, California, the first “pro-vaping circuit” event. AmeraVape Technologies is a manufacturer of vaping equipment, particularly for folks who want to modify their devices to produce more smoke. A few days before, over the

phone, AmeraVape's CEO Erik Hutchinson told me he's organizing competitions like these in order to bring greater awareness to vaping.

When Hutchinson talks about vaping—that's what e-cig users call the practice of smoking with these battery-powered, refillable devices that turn "e-juice" into an aerosol—he's like a preacher spreading the Gospel. A Gospel that just happens to make him money. He says showing people that vaping could be cleaner and healthier than smoking is his "mission," and that vapers are like a "band of brothers." And he believes the surging popularity of e-cigarettes signals the death of the tobacco industry.

"Big Tobacco can't get involved in the vape world," he says. "It [would be] almost like Jagermeister sponsoring AA meetings. People want to get *away* from Big Tobacco."

Over the past seven years, as the Food and Drug Administration has tried to determine just how good or bad electronic cigarettes are for people, the technology has gone from being largely unknown in the United States to exploding into a \$2 billion dollar industry—one that's still so unregulated, it's legal for minors to buy them in some states.

"It's essentially a wild west," says Brian King, a senior adviser with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Office on Smoking and Health. "And there's no conclusive scientific evidence yet to prove whether or not e-cigarettes actually aid smokers in quitting."

But even without that evidence, vapers are devout, crediting vaping with their freedom from traditional cigarettes. For many, this isn't a hobby; it's a lifestyle, a brotherhood, a community, a movement fighting for a "right to vape," and a religion for reformed smokers. Many credit the surge in the

vaping lifestyle to social media, where hashtags like “#vapelyfe” and “#chickswhovape” have thousands of posts. On Instagram, you don’t have to go far to find vapers—like a woman who calls herself “PureFantasiaVape”—who credits vaping to saving her life, and calls her followers “family.”

“The people who are in this are almost like born again,” Hutchinson says. “It basically gives everybody a common goal. That’s the thing we all need. United we vape, divided we fall.”

* * *

Herbert Gilbert takes a long drag from what looks like a cigarette. “Show me the fire!” he yells to a crowd at the Save the Vape rally last March in Los Angeles. They cheer back at him.

Back in 1965, Gilbert—then a heavy smoker—filed a patent for a “smokeless non-tobacco cigarette.” An advertisement from the patent office boasted that his “battery-powered ‘cigarette’ uses no tobacco and produces no smoke” and that the invention “also has medical potential.”

You could argue that the timing for Gilbert’s idea couldn’t have been worse: The 1960s were boom years for tobacco advertising—a time when cigarette companies could still get away with ads that boasted that “More Doctors Smoke Camels Than Any Other Cigarette.” Gilbert’s e-cigarette never went into production, despite his appeals to tobacco companies—which we now know have been researching a healthier alternative to cigarettes since the 1950s.

King says e-cigarettes eventually made their way to the U.S. from China in 2007, “and we started to monitor their use around 2010.”

“What we’ve seen is a marked uptick in the use of these products in a very short time period,” he says, and those aren’t just traditional smokers making the switch, but kids who’ve never smoked before. Between 2011 and 2012, e-cig use doubled among middle school and high school students. An American Heart Association statement says that as of early 2014, there were 466 brands of e-cigarette and 7764 flavors on the market.

Cheryl Richter was an early adopter of the electronic cigarette, and found fellowship among other Long Island vapers in 2009. By the end of that year, the group evolved into the National Vapers Club. Richter, the club’s treasurer, says that since then, the NVC aims to educate people interested in vaping, raise money for scientific research, and protect the rights of vapers.

Richter—who also owns an e-cig shop and manufacturer called Cherry Vapes on the New York/Connecticut border — says she thinks the vaping movement was able to catch on so quickly because, for so many people, quitting smoking is life-changing. Vaping helped them quit, and they wanted to tell the world about it.

“People who had literally been smoking for decades, all of a sudden are never having another cigarette again,” Richter says. “We’ve been kind of bullied outside for a very long time. We’re told we smell, and we’re going to die. And get away from my kids with that [cigarette]. So now we’re vaping and we’re very proud of ourselves. *Extremely* proud of ourselves.”

Without any proven scientific information out there yet, when laws come down on vapers—like the ban on vaping in public places passed earlier this year in Los Angeles—Richter says that’s when the NVC tries to get involved. Vapers come

from every walk of life, she says. The thing that connects them is their shared belief that they have a right to vape without over-reaching restrictions.

“I’ve never met so many libertarians in my life,” Richter laughs. And she says there’s a reason for that: Smokers who were able to quit traditional cigarettes with vaping feel bitter about how powerful Big Tobacco is, and what a stronghold it had on their lives.

Vapers want a fight: the people versus Big Tobacco.

But with no solid scientific studies out there, what makes e-cig users so sure that they’re fighting for something that’s truly safer than cigarettes? The FDA has released some studies finding traces of diethylene glycol and nitrosamines in the devices, but Richter insists they weren’t legitimate studies. The NVC and the Consumer Advocates for Smoke-free Alternatives Association often find solace in a study conducted by a Drexel University researcher, which claims e-cigs pose little health risk. But even that study has been disputed.

Richter says the entrance of Big Tobacco-owned “cigalike” e-cigarettes—brands like blu eCigs, Vuse and MarkTen—put a blight on the entire vaping movement, not to mention bolster an industry that has seen falling cigarette sales for decades.

“They call *us* Big Tobacco now,” she says. “We’re not Big Tobacco. We’re former carpenters, electricians, engineers. People who saw this product, tinkered with it to make it better and really brought it to market to make it work. We’re not some Big Tobacco trying to hook a whole new generation on nicotine. The 15,000 vape shop owners across the country got into this to get *away* from combustible tobacco. When you lump this in with Big Tobacco, like my own Senator

Blumenthal has done, it's very insulting. It's *very* insulting. And it's wrong."

Whether users pick up a disposable "cigalike" or a refillable, variable-voltage vaporizer like Richter sells might not matter though. Dr. Adriana Blanco, of the World Health Organization's Tobacco Control Team, says she's not optimistic about either device.

"The problem, I think, is that they are building on the legal status of cigarettes," Blanco says. "In a way they pose themselves as something totally different from cigarettes ... the concerning issue is when you think the majority of the big entities that are producing these e-cigarettes belong to the cigarette industry."

Richter acknowledges that the odds are stacked against vapers. And that's why, she says, it's essential that vapers stay on their best behavior right now. Vaping in restaurants or on subway trains, or cloud chasing, might bring undue restriction before the proper research is out there.

"I don't want to be bullied again. I don't want to feel like I have to stand in the cold again because some jabronis want to blow a three-foot cloud," Richter says.

* * *

Rodney Jerabek was never a smoker. The Southern California brand designer is the type who'd have a cigar on the golf course. He's a wine collector, a foodie, a guy who likes a nice single-malt scotch.

Ask anyone involved in vaping, and they'll tell you the American movement caught on in California and spread eastward. Jerabek certainly noticed the way e-cig shops were

popping up all around Los Angeles and Orange County. And everywhere, even in gas stations, he saw hundreds of flavors of plastic squeeze-bottle-packaged e-juice in flavors like sour apple and vanilla. They're the sweet, candy-like flavors that big tobacco companies making “cigalike” products have argued only appeal to children.

So Jerabek started his own brand with a more refined look: Five Pawns.

Five Pawns' menu of e-juice reads like a wine menu: flavors like "Bowden's Mate" promise "crisp mint with subtle chocolate undertones and a French vanilla finish," and "Absolute Pin," gives an "intense complexity of Irish cream, cinnamon spice, and caramel with subtle absinthe undertones." Some "reserve" flavors are aged in oak barrels. And all of the flavors come in different strengths of nicotine—from zero to 18 milligrams.

"We've often been compared to the Johnny Walker Blue of e-liquid," Jerabek says. "All of our branding and all of our marketing is going after an upper-tier clientele ... It's not a liquid that is for someone who quit smoking yesterday. We cater to more of an aficionado or a connoisseur."

While on one hand, the appearance of high-end brands like Five Pawns proves just how widely the e-cig market has been able to spread its wings as the FDA scrambles. But it also shows a product within the vaping industry that is aligning itself for whatever legal storms might lie ahead.

"The FDA is right on with what they're proposing with targeting toward youth. I do not believe that this product should be in the hands of people under 18," Jerabek says. "Nicotine is a stimulant, and nicotine is addictive. And we do sell a tremendous amount of product with no nicotine, but it

is still an addictive stimulant just like coffee ... I don't think kids under 18 should be drinking Starbucks either."

Nicotine poisoning has surged in recent years. A *New York Times* article says that in 2013, e-juice consumption calls to poison control centers rose by 300 percent. That's precisely why Jerabek says Five Pawns discontinued its 24-milligram strength juice. "Lets just say a child were to drink 24-milligram strength bottle by accident, that could potentially be a problem," he says. Though he says Five Pawns sells a "tremendous" amount of e-juice with zero nicotine content, for people who want enjoy the flavor, like they might enjoy wine.

And though many cloud chasers also vape nicotine-free e-juices—a blend of propylene glycol (the stuff that comes out of fog machines) and vegetable glycerine—Jerabek isn't trying to cater to those folks. "I don't think it's good for the industry," he says.

* * *

Ahmed Lakhane works at New York's Henley Vaporium and runs the podcast "Plumes of Hazard" with four of his friends—a fascinating program that shows just how deep vape-tech geekery can go. But the 25-year-old says he's over cloud chasing.

"I'm done chasing. I guess I found my cloud. I'm not trying to go any larger," he says.

Cloud chasing, he says, combines three things: technique, air flow, and building the right technology—but not everyone understands the restrictions of their devices.

"These people are basically pushing batteries to their limits if

not *past* their limits,” he says. Lakaney says that when he sells e-cigarettes now at Henley, he’s sure to preach safety, too. One exploded battery in someone’s face could ruin vaping for everyone. “It’s just one of those things where you’ve got to be smart about it not just for your own sake and your own safety, but it’s bad press.”

Cloud chasing is like the beer-bonging of the vaping world. “Cloud chasing is perfectly indicative of American culture. The whole ‘bigger is better’ mentality,” he says. Now isn’t the time, he says, for e-cigarettes to get any negative press. “People’s own sense of entitlement when it comes to vaping can hurt the industry in the long run. The ball’s not in our court, we’re not calling the shots.”

Erik Hutchinson, the guy trying to start the pro-vaping circuit, admits cloud chasers are “on the extreme end of vaping.” Hutchinson says he just wants people to see it as a healthy alternative to smoking.

He says vaping is more than just quitting. It’s a movement of Americans putting their feet down on oppressive corporations and snuffing out Big Tobacco, once and for all. “Sometimes it just takes something as simple as vaping to reignite that spark that built this country in the first place.”

<http://m.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/10/the-right-to-vape/381145/>