

Bethany Zell
Caribou, Maine
LD 1215

I was born and raised in Caribou where I currently reside. I am a wife, a small-business owner, and mom to 3 girls, ages 12, 19 and 26. As a parent, I do everything I can to protect my children and make sure they have all the tools they need to make the right choices in life. With that, I've made sure they know how dangerous tobacco is, and how the industry targets them to line their own pockets, hoping to hook future generations to their deadly products.

But I worry that's not enough because for me, it wasn't. Like the nearly 700 Maine kids who become new daily smokers each year, I got sucked in as a teen – experimenting long before my 18th birthday and finally becoming a full-time smoker when I went to college. My oldest daughter joined me and the 95 percent of adult smokers who began smoking before age 21. Like 4 of every 5 Maine smokers, my daughter and I both started with flavored tobacco products – menthol cigarettes. My self-proclaimed “college habit” lasted long into my 20s and I struggled to quit multiple times before finally succeeding after 11 years of smoking a pack or more every day.

In 2015, after having not smoked for 15 years, I picked up a menthol vape on a friend's recommendation when they first came on the market. I was immediately hooked! What started as a one bottle of e-juice a month habit quickly escalated to one bottle a week and by the time I started having panic attacks if I left the house without a backup battery pack or charger for my device, I was finishing a bottle every couple days. After one year of complete dependence on the device and the nicotine it delivered, I was at a scientific cancer conference in California and a researcher-presenter who had been doing vape research back in his lab in NC called me out on “my habit” informing me of some of the horrors he was seeing in their studies. I went home determined to quit, but found it to be even more difficult than quitting my previous 11 year cigarette habit! I even ended up picking up menthol cigarettes again for a short time as I “stepped-down” from my menthol vape.

Thankfully, I have now been tobacco free AGAIN for about 6 years. Only now as I approach the age of 50, do I realize that more than half of my life has been spent struggling with tobacco dependence - the result of one bad decision I made at the age of 18. Even during my non-smoking years, I occasionally felt/feel the continued pull of my nicotine addiction.

My daughter and I both got hooked as teens and we both know with 100% confidence that had menthol not been available, we never would have started using tobacco products in the first place. Here in Maine, the tobacco industry spends \$42.8 million in marketing each year. Much of this marketing is aimed at our youth with fruit and candy-flavored tobacco products in colorful, candy-coated packages endorsed by (and even named after) their favorite icons and social media influencers. Grape Crush, Hawaiian Punch, Mango Slushee and Gummy Bear. Flavors aren't designed to recruit adult smokers, they are intended to create lifelong customers for Big Tobacco. It is important that we protect the next generation of Mainers from flavored tobacco products designed to hook them young, like my daughter and I were. All Maine youth deserve a future with hope – not a lifetime of increased risk of diseases and premature death due to tobacco use. However, for many Maine youth, like myself and my oldest daughter, the temptation is just too great and the tobacco industry's marketing too tempting. That's why it is so imperative lawmakers take action by ending the sale of flavored tobacco products state-wide by enacting LD 1215.