

Dr. E. Ulysses “Yul” Dorotheo

*Judy Wilkenfeld Award speech, 18 May 2011*

Colleagues and friends, ladies and gentlemen, good evening.

Some of you are wondering how an eye doctor became a tobacco control advocate. Ten years ago, I would've wondered the same thing. A medical education and years of working in the government-owned Philippine General Hospital had certainly given me a glimpse of the social and economic burden of disease borne by the poor in my country. Before tobacco control beckoned, I was gearing up for public health advocacy focused on blindness prevention.

Before I got hooked, I had no idea that more than half of all adult Filipino males smoked, or that ten Filipinos died every hour from tobacco use, or that tobacco back then killed more than 4 million people globally each year. I certainly had never heard about the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, and prior to 2001, I had been blissfully unaware of the lies and half-truths, manipulativeness, callousness, and outright arrogance of the tobacco industry.

But as fate would have it, I learned about tobacco, about tobacco control and the FCTC, and most importantly, about the tobacco industry. It was awful enough to realize that back then only a handful of people in my country knew or cared about the tobacco epidemic, but I was more disgusted to know that as early as the 1980s, the tobacco industry had already trained its sights on developing nations: “We want Asia,” said one industry executive, and I was sickened to find out how tobacco industry executives and lawyers for decades denied in public what they knew in private as the truth about nicotine addiction and tobacco-caused health harms. In fact, it was a Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids publication titled “Trust Us, We’re the Tobacco Industry” that fueled my passion.

Since then, I have been privileged to work alongside equally dedicated and passionate colleagues in pushing for the FCTC and the strongest possible evidence-based tobacco control policies to be implemented in the Philippines, in Southeast Asia, and throughout the world. Thus, I am deeply honored to receive tonight the Judy Wilkenfeld award, not only because it recognizes personal achievements, but more significantly because it embodies the traits for which Judy was known: respecting diversity, working to build consensus and bring people together, and serving as a mentor and role model for others. As a young volunteer, I was encouraged and supported by tobacco control giants in Asia such as Daniel Tan, Harley Stanton, and Judith Mackay. Since joining the Southeast Asia Tobacco Control Alliance or SEATCA, I have been guided and inspired by Mary Assunta and Bungon Ritthiphakdee, two of the most diligent, courageous, and visionary advocates I have ever known. But more than just mentoring, I would underscore the larger concepts of teamwork and coalition building, which are of vital importance in low and middle-income countries with severely limited financial resources for tobacco control. In this context, my story is not unique. There are many other tobacco control advocates in low and middle-income Asian countries working together tirelessly and without thought of reward or recognition. I accept this award also on their behalf.

The battle, however, is far from over. While SEATCA has helped advocates make steady progress towards achieving 100% smoke-free environments, comprehensive tobacco advertising bans, large pictorial health warnings, and more recently higher tobacco taxes and prices, the cards are still stacked against us. In mega-countries such as China, tobacco use continues to claim 1 million lives each year. Indonesian men, women, and children continue to be bombarded with tobacco advertisements, promotions, and sponsorships. And similar to other developing nations in Southeast Asia, cigarettes remain extremely affordable in the Philippines at less than 70 US cents per pack of Marlboros.

I therefore stand here tonight with a challenge and an appeal to all of you: help us right these wrongs! The Marlboro cowboy may have ridden out of the US, but we are continually taking on Philip Morris and other transnational tobacco companies in the Philippines and in Asia. We need to fight collectively to ensure that public health is prioritized over international trade.

The United States has demonstrated it can do tobacco control in many ways, however it can go further to be a world leader in fighting the tobacco pandemic. Next year, when the Australian government introduces the world's first plain, standardized cigarette packaging, cigarette packs sold in the U.S. will finally carry pictorial health warnings that cover 50% of the pack's front and back. I urge the United States to also ratify the FCTC and join the 172 countries that are already party to it. What about incorporating tobacco and non-communicable diseases in USAID's Global Health Initiative? All these measures will have a significantly positive impact on tobacco control internationally.

For most folks, some of the many things you can do to help would include urging your local and state governments to pass smokefree laws that cover all workplaces and public places; or donating 50 or 100 dollars a month to CTFK to help train and support more youth advocates, whether in the US or internationally, some of whom may grow up to be their country's next leaders; considering the size of this audience, that would be a huge amount for a developing country.

The point is this: 5.4 million tobacco deaths every year is 5.4 million more than we can or should tolerate, but working together, we can make a difference, so that one day, our children or grandchildren will live in a tobacco-free world.

Dr. E. Ulysses Dorotheo

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Project Director