

**Testimony of  
Ms. Cassandra Coleman of Chicago, Illinois**

**Before the Senate Subcommittee on Oversight  
of Government Management, Restructuring  
and the District of Columbia**

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Chairman Durbin and members of the committee, let me begin by thanking you for holding this hearing and for inviting me to testify today.

My story is also the story of two wonderful children: my 13-year-old son, Nijell, and my 10-year-old daughter, Nzingha, who is with me today.

My son's name means "success" in Swahili, and Nzingha is named for a 16<sup>th</sup> Century African queen who fought with strength and courage to free her people from the slave trade. I never realized how well I named them until they helped me stop smoking – because Nzingha and Nijell truly helped me quit smoking and helped free me from addiction to nicotine.

Growing up as a young girl in Chicago, most of the women around me smoked. One of my role models was my sister-in-law, a tall, beautiful woman with long hair. She smoked, and she was so glamorous. I remember thinking that I wanted to be just like her.

I also remember watching TV with my friends, seeing all of the sophisticated, sexy ladies on our favorite programs. They all smoked too, so everyone seemed to be smoking cigarettes and I couldn't wait to try them.

I was about 11 years old when I started smoking. My girlfriends and I would buy cigarettes from vending machines, and in those days a pack cost 50 cents. If anyone asked us what we were doing, we just said we were buying them for our parents.

I had problems carrying Nzingha when I was pregnant with her, and she was born five weeks early. She had a low heart rate and other problems that placed her in the intensive care unit after her birth for three days.

I remember seeing her with so many tubes running into her tiny body. It reminded me of a poster I had seen at Cook County Hospital just four days before her birth. It warned pregnant women what smoking could do to their child – and there was a picture of a little baby with all kinds of tubes, just like the ones in my daughter.

Nzingha got out of the hospital and came home, but I kept on smoking.

In the months that followed, I had to take her to the emergency room over and over with breathing problems. The doctors told me she had upper airway disease, and by the time she was six months old she was getting nebulizer treatments four times a day.

This went on year after year, and the doctors told me to quit cigarettes. But I kept on smoking.

When Nzingha was almost four, I took her to the emergency room with an especially bad asthma attack. They told me her condition was so bad that if I had arrived just five minutes later, she probably would have died. A nurse pulled me aside

and told me, “you’re killing her with your cigarettes.”

But I kept on smoking.

Instead of quitting, I put air cleaning machines around my house and started smoking in the bathroom to try and keep the smoke away from my kids.

But that didn’t help much. When Nijell was about 8 years old, he developed asthma and joined his sister in getting regular nebulizer treatments.

And me? I just kept on smoking.

Then, a couple of years ago, I began to have health problems of my own. I constantly felt weak, low on energy, and short of breath. I developed a cough that made me feel like there was always something in my lungs. When I went to get checked out, the medical people could never find anything really wrong with me – they’d just tell me to slow down. I remember one of the doctors found out how much I smoked and asked me: “Do you want to live or die?”

Well, of course, I wanted to live. But I also wanted to keep on smoking. So I did.

And I continued to feel worse and worse. Finally, in January of last year, I was coming out of the bathroom after having a cigarette when I saw my daughter curled up on the bed crying. When I asked her what was wrong, she said “Get away from me! You stink! You’re trying to kill me with cigarettes.”

Imagine hearing that from your own child. I promised her and myself then and there that I would quit smoking. And I knew I needed help.

I called Cook County Hospital and made an appointment for the smoking cessation program. I went the next week – and I was motivated.

I kept seeing Nzingha’s face and I knew I had to do it for her and for Nijell. I had the help of a wonderful doctor – Dr. Arthur Hoffman – who worked with me and taught me breathing techniques. He taught me how to relax and how to resist the urge to smoke.

It wasn’t easy. But I did it. I quit, cold turkey. I’m proud to tell you that after 25 years of smoking two packs a day, I haven’t had a cigarette in a year and I’m never going to have one again. I’m now working part-time in the smoking cessation program at Cook County Hospital trying to help others quit.

I can’t tell you how much better I feel every day. I had gotten to the point where I couldn’t even walk up the steps to my house without difficulty. Now I can almost run up those steps! I walk, I exercise more, and I don’t have coughs and colds like I used to have.

My children couldn’t be happier. Nijell and Nzingha are doing so much better, and we have not been to the emergency room in over a year.

And because I’ve quit, the rest of my life is going to be a lot longer than it would have been. That means more years raising and loving my children – and more years that I can help other women and girls avoid my mistakes.

We have to help the women, but it's the girls we **really** have to talk to. I tell as many girls as I can that smoking is a nasty and dangerous habit, and I tell them how hard it is to quit.

Sometimes in the smoking cessation program, I talk to people who've abused hard drugs, and they've told me that it's easier to kick a heroin or cocaine habit than it is to quit smoking cigarettes.

I also feel that young women need to resist the messages we get every day about smoking from the media. Whether it's a soap opera or a magazine ad, images that make cigarettes seem attractive only lead women to an early grave.

Again, Mr. Chairman, thank you for this opportunity to tell you my story. I hope that together we can prevent any more women from becoming victims of tobacco.