



A FIRST BREATH SUCCESS STORY



By Keisha Rovick

LA CROSSE - If you see Sheila Larson these days, you'll probably see her with Tootsie Pop suckers.

Sheila is 23 and had long ago given up suckers, but she has no problem breaking one out now that she's pregnant with her first child and into just her first month of being smoke free.

Sheila, a WIC client at La Crosse County, agreed to enroll in the First Breath Program in August. At the time of this interview, she had been smoke free for only six days, but vowed she would finally kick the habit this time.

"I've been smoking since sixth grade, and it was always just something most of us just did," she said. "But now, I'm in a situation where this will affect the baby. I want to have a health baby, and to do that, I know I must be substance free, and that includes tobacco," Sheila said. "I've stopped smoking. If it takes a sucker to stay smoke free, I can handle that."

Sheila said she gets support from family members she lives with and her boyfriend, who smokes.

"He supports me in this, and he doesn't smoke as much around me, including cutting down on smoking in the car," Sheila said. "I want my child to be healthy. I have found out through the First Breath Program that I can help ensure that by eliminating tobacco."

Beth Inge, 21, was one of the first clients to enroll in the La Crosse County First Breath Program. She is pregnant with her second child.

"In addition to wanting a healthy baby, I have another incentive, my 4-year-old daughter," Beth said. "My baby is my number one priority in terms of making sure I stay smoke free."

Beth quit smoking during her first pregnancy, but started up shortly after giving birth. "It was connected with the people I hung out with and the socializing," she said. "This time, I'm sure it will be different." The difference, Beth said, is First Breath.

"I know now that I'll have cravings, but there are ways of dealing with them without starting to smoke again," Beth said. "Now when I get those cravings, I start doing something, anything, such as cleaning the house, until the cravings stop."

First Breath reinforces things she heard earlier in her life, but it means more, Sheila said.

"In high school, we all took a health class, and we learned about the risks associated with smoking," Sheila said. "We heard what they were saying, but it kind of went in one ear and out the other."

"But, First Breath puts smoking in a much different light," she said. "It's a matter of how it affects the baby before birth, after birth and how it affects moms. The program really gets your attention because it's directly related to your present condition."

Sheila's comments are music to the ears of the La Crosse County Health Department.

"These are successes we work hard to achieve," said Linda Lee, the nutrition manager for the La Crosse County Health Department. "It's very gratifying to see these young moms work so hard to help themselves and their babies. It shows how much can be done with just a little help in terms of resources and a very well run program such as First Breath."