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Helen O'Neill, 91, of Newport quit smoking last year after keeping the habit for 70 years.

Breath of fresh air 91-year-old quit smoking after 70 years

By James J. Gillis
Daily News staff

NEWPORT — It's been a year since Helen O'Neill said goodbye to her beloved Now 100s and cleaned out her last ashtray.

The Housing Authority of Newport was getting ready to ban smoking in her building, Donovan Manor, anyway. So she quit — after 70 years.

"It really wasn't hard at all," she said. "I decided to stop, so I stopped."

O'Neill is 91 and took up smoking when she was about 20.

"I was in a sewing group in Newport with some ladies, and they all smoked," she recalled. "I'd get in

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HELEN O'NEILL

the car and I couldn't stand the smell of the smoke. They told me the only way to get used to it was to start smoking. So I tried it. I was dizzy the first time, but then I practiced and got the hang of it. It made you look distinguished, distinguished and classy."

Today is the 35th Great American Smokeout, run by the American Cancer Society, which encourages smokers to quit for a day with hopes they'll stop for good. O'Neill

said she quit because she wanted to, though her sons — Doug and Don — prodded her through the years.

"But they smoke cigars sometimes, so they need to quit," she said. "But I don't bug them. Let people live the way they want."

With her building ready to go smoke-free, the idea of smoking outside in cold, rain and snow became unappealing. At first, O'Neill chewed on a plastic cigarette replica, but she tossed it aside as her confidence built.

"People act like it's a big deal," she said. "But I wanted to quit, so I did. I know you're supposed to feel different, feel better, but I really

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don't. I smoked for 70 years. They say you start feeling better after you've stopped for as long as you smoked. In that case, I'd be 100."

If you're looking for a smoker turned anti-smoking crusader, keep looking. In O'Neill's view, anti-smoking resolutions should, well, butt out. The Great American Smoke-out means little to her.

"If you want to smoke, go ahead smoke," she said. "If you don't want to, then don't. I don't tell people how to live their lives. Leave people alone."

O'Neill was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., and grew up in Vermont. When she joined the Navy in World War II, she landed in Newport.

She met her late husband, Arthur O'Neill, in Newport and opened the Helca O'Neill School of Ballet. She keeps photos of her former dancers inside her apartment and on the wall next to her door.

"It was the best time of my life, absolutely," she said.

She closed the school about 30 years ago, after her hus-

band died, and moved to Fort Myers, Fla., where she worked as a tour guide and loved to go dancing. There's still a bit of glamour girl and show biz in her. O'Neill likes animal print furniture covers and keeps a collection of glittery dresses and sparkling shoes in her apartment closet, just in case.

"I came back to Newport about six years ago because I wanted to live near my kids," she said. "But it's kind of Dullsville, with all my favorite stores like J.C. Penny and Cherry's gone. There's no place for people like me to go dancing. I don't have a date. At my age, they're either all dead or can't move."

James Reed, executive director of the Housing Authority of Newport, said the agency made its units smoke-free in April. Smokers must be 50 feet from buildings, and repeat offenders face lease violations, the severest penalty. The agency offered stop-smoking programs, though O'Neill never bothered with one.

"With Mrs. O'Neill, you have a woman who quit cold turkey at 90," Reed said.

"That's remarkable. We gave her a 'Way to Go' award. She's provided a great example. I

know a couple of the other residents see Mrs. O'Neill as something of an inspiration. They think if she can do it, so can they."

All the praise is a lot of hot air to O'Neill, who says she never worried about getting lung cancer or emphysema from smoking.

"I thought that was a bunch of baloney," she said. "But now I think there's something to it."

The best part, she said, is saving money. "I spend about \$30 a week on groceries where it used to be \$60 or more," she said. "Of course, I'm 91, so I find other ways to spend. What else am I going to do?"

Quitting smoking was nothing heroic, she said, nor does she regret the years she spent puffing away. She is more upset about her failing eyesight, which forced her to quit driving. But now that she's quit smoking, O'Neill said, she is too proud to light up again.

"It's better for me, I suppose. I don't want to undo the good I've done. Who knows? Maybe I'll live to be 100."

Send reporter James J. Gillis e-mail at Gillis@NewportRI.com.

35TH GREAT AMERICAN SMOKEOUT

