

August 3, 2007

PUBLIC LIVES

Fighting Addiction, on a Variety of Fronts

By [ROBIN FINN](#)

ONCE one accepts the premise that addictions are as unique as snowflakes or thumbprints, the addiction confessed by Karen M. Carpenter-Palumbo, commissioner of the New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services, seems practically legitimate.

Ms. Carpenter-Palumbo's personal, private until now (hey, it's her own fault that she's a stickler for full disclosure) addiction goes by a deceptively nutritious-sounding name, Blackjack Cherry. And, talk about convenience and enabling: It is delivered right to her doorstep in Bethlehem, an Albany suburb, by Schwan's, a local ice cream company.

Blackjack Cherry is the culprit behind her decision to shed 30 pounds by November. She figures her goal is doable if she patronizes her treadmill for a half-hour each morning and maintains a two-pounds-per-week shrinkage rate. Much like [Eliot Spitzer](#), the governor at whose pleasure she serves (last time it was [Mario M. Cuomo](#), for whom she was an assistant secretary and senior policy adviser on mental health and substance abuse issues), Ms. Carpenter-Palumbo, 44, is very enamored of statistics.

One particularly harsh statistic — nearly 92 percent of the 110,000 clients her agency serves are smokers — motivated Ms. Carpenter-Palumbo's recent announcement that by July 2008, New York intends to be the first state to require all addiction treatment centers to provide clients with a program to cure nicotine dependence as well. Participation by smokers, and employees of the treatment centers, will be mandatory: The facilities will be smoke-free. There have already been complaints about the rule being too onerous. What if it discourages smokers from seeking treatment for alcoholism or drug addiction?

Ms. Carpenter-Palumbo, sitting in a borrowed corner office in the agency's Midtown outpost (headquarters are in Albany), has a ready answer.

"I've heard the complaints about my 'Big Sister' approach," she says, "but nobody can tell me smoking is good for you, and everybody knows it's a trigger to other addictions. My clients are dying 25 years younger than you or I will, and what kills them is tobacco. I can't in good conscience tell our clients, 'We're here to help you recover from your drug and alcohol addiction but guess what, you're going to die of cancer anyway.' "

The state's Department of Health has committed \$8 million to the antismoking initiative: \$4 million to train clinicians and \$4 million for nicotine replacement devices.

Ms. Carpenter-Palumbo, an upstate native with a downstate metabolism — she talks fast, walks fast and shops fast (a capacious \$40 Prada knockoff is her latest quick pick) — was raised in laid-back Horseheads, near Elmira. Her father sold insurance by day and drank to excess most nights. He wound up at a treatment facility in 1984 during

Ms. Carpenter-Palumbo's senior year at Rochester Institute of Technology, where she trained to become a social worker; she received a master's degree in social work from [Adelphi University](#). Her father is, she says, "in recovery." He even quit smoking.

HER mother, also a smoker, was a nurse at the Elmira Psychiatric Center. Her parents divorced when she was 10, right around the time she got caught stealing and puffing her mom's Kent Golden Lights. She was grounded for a month, sufficient incentive to kick smoking before it became a habit. Her mother was less fortunate. She survived a major heart attack at age 52, and has not smoked since. Consider her parents' history of addictive behavior cautionary tales that they have lived to tell.

Nineteen years ago Ms. Carpenter-Palumbo married Bob Palumbo. He manages the emergency room at Albany Medical Center, prefers diagnosticians to politicians, and does the cooking. "I would rather give a speech in front of 5,000 people than cook a meal," she admits.

Her husband, too, has battled a nicotine addiction, not only in deference to her career (before joining the Spitzer squad, she was a regional vice president of the [American Cancer Society](#)), but for the sake of their two children, aged 11 and 7. The older, Kyle, received a diagnosis of cystic fibrosis when he was 3, just six weeks after his little sister was born. Ms. Carpenter-Palumbo, a repository even of facts that cause her pain, notes that the median life expectancy for those with this disease, curable only by a lung transplant, is 35.

It's not surprising that in addition to being a past president of the Make-a-Wish Foundation of northeastern New York, she is president of the region's Cystic Fibrosis Association. When it comes to missions, she is a certified multitasker.

"After we found out about my son's illness and I was kind of falling apart, my father took me aside and told me, 'You're a fighter, you've been a fighter all your life for people with addictions and disabilities who can't fight for themselves, and now you've got to fight for your son,' " she says.

Ms. Carpenter-Palumbo's pert pug nose reddens, and her eyes drip, when she discusses the life-threatening disease her son is coping with. But she is a pragmatist: "I tell him, 'Everybody's got something, this is what you have, and we as a family are going to get you through it.' "

Having a pair of rowdy Old English sheepdogs to wrestle around with helps. Ms. Carpenter-Palumbo fixated on the breed decades ago after seeing the sitcom "Please Don't Eat the Daisies." Had to have one. Now she has two. Three cheers for harmless addictions.

And don't get her started on her tireless campaign to reconcile the gray hair that hit at 30 — genetics can be cruel — with the robust rest of her. Simply put, her hair is in perpetual rehab.

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