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USVI Woman Sues Big Tobacco and Local Retailers, Linking Childhood Smoke Exposure and Lifelong Addiction to Cancer and Stroke

Riise Richards, in her late 60s, says childhood exposure to cigarette smoke created a “pre-addiction” that led to decades of smoking. The lawsuit links her habit to breast cancer, a recent stroke, and ongoing health problems, citing fraud by Big Tobacco.

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Symbolic image showing the toll of cigarette use, central to a USVI lawsuit linking decades of smoking to cancer, stroke, and ongoing health struggles. By. GETTY IMAGES.

The Pate law firm has filed another lawsuit against major tobacco companies and local retailers, this time on behalf of Riise Richards, a woman in her late sixties who claims her lifelong exposure to cigarette smoke led to cancer, a stroke, and other health complications.

According to the 88-page complaint filed Monday, Richards grew up constantly surrounded by cigarette smoke. Her “family members, friends, teachers, mentors, neighbors” all smoked, the lawsuit states. “Cigarette smoke was all around the plaintiff growing up and into her adult life.” The filing argues that this second-hand exposure “created in her as an early child a psychological pre-addiction to cigarette smoke, along with embedding cigarette smoke toxins into her body at a young and developing age.”

Richards began smoking at age 14. Within two years, she was smoking half a pack of cigarettes a day. By 22, her consumption had increased to more than two packs daily, and she eventually married a cigarette smoker.

The lawsuit follows a similar path as the case [filed last month](#) by plaintiff Dennis Yodzio, also represented by the Pate firm. Like that case, Richards’s complaint argues that as public awareness of smoking’s dangers grew, tobacco companies responded with advertising campaigns designed to portray smoking as safe and enjoyable.

By the 2000s, when the dangers of smoking were widely accepted, Richards began trying to quit. She was only able to stop in 2006, after being diagnosed with breast cancer. The lawsuit states, “Although she did not know it at the time – and tobacco companies hid and denied the association – cigarette smoke substantially increases the risk of a woman developing breast cancer.”

Her years of smoking were also cited as a “substantial contributing factor” in a stroke she suffered earlier this year, according to the complaint. The filing claims Richards’s smoking-related medical problems are likely to persist.

The lawsuit names Philip Morris USA, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, and Liggett & Myers Tobacco Company as defendants, accusing them of fraud, misrepresentation, and conspiracy. Local wholesalers Island Saints and retailers United Corporation (Plaza Extra) and KAC357 (Pueblo Supermarkets, Cost-U-Less) are also listed, accused of encouraging smoking in the Virgin Islands through “sales, promotions, marketing and advertising strategy.”

Richards is seeking a jury trial, with claims for compensatory, consequential, and punitive damages, as well as damages for pain and suffering, mental anguish, and loss of enjoyment of life.

As of press time, the defendants had not filed a response.