

# Meet René Hicks....Laughter Advocate....Lung Cancer Survivor

## Secondhand Smoke Is No Joke

*“It is evident that through your comedy you are able to reach even the toughest audiences and you provide both new and seasoned advocates with a fresh perspective on the issue of secondhand smoke – inspiring them to keep on striving toward our common goals.”* **Cynthia Hallett, Executive Director—American Nonsmokers’ Rights Foundation**

As a comedian, René Hicks says she never performed--she believed. She was determined to use her comedy to make a difference in people's lives. By addressing societal ills through humor, she was very successful in providing quality entertainment that was not only hilarious, but contained a message that something as simple as laughter could assist in crossing social and cultural barriers that contribute to isolation and intolerance. The end result is having an overall healthier and better adjusted society. She witnessed her efforts being rewarded by seeing diverse audiences across the US and around the world being unified by laughter. Now, as a speaker, René Hicks says she doesn't lecture--she's on a mission. She believes that it is no mere earthly coincidence that her talent to make people laugh, and a bout with lung cancer, as a result of her exposure to secondhand smoke, created a life-altering intersection.

In the world of comedy the highest compliment paid to a comic that has elicited maximum response from the audience is “you killed”. This high form of praise was often heaped upon René, who now marvels at the irony that while she was “killing” in all those smoke-filled venues, the secondhand smoke almost killed her. “How can it be that cancer is the least funniest subject to talk about, yet I get lung cancer from secondhand smoke while working in comedy clubs? That's like a nutritionist working at a fast food restaurant, suffering a stroke due to continually watching people eat junk food”. Even with her background of having been an accountant, she could not have calculated the miniscule odds of a woman in her thirties, who was an energetic, health conscious, athlete--a former collegiate distance runner--no less, who had never smoked being diagnosed with lung cancer. “It's funny, but I found that people had an easier time accepting that I had lung cancer, without ever smoking, than that I was an accountant, with a sense of humor.”

It is no wonder that a comedian with a positive message of unity and a person who has been active in her community since her high school days in San Francisco, where René helped collect signatures to put an initiative (“Proposition 10”) on the ballot--designating smoking and non-smoking sections in all public facilities in California, would view getting lung cancer, as a calling to effect change on an even wider plane. Her conviction was cemented by the fact she found that her God-given gift for creating laughter was instrumental in enabling her to overcome a major health crisis and also help family and friends in dealing with such an unexpected and uncertain situation. It was by living and laughing through this ordeal that René came to realize that whether it's societal ills or physical ills, laughter could be an effective healing tool. “They say that love is so powerful that it can move mountains, but laughter is more powerful, because it will help cure your depression after you break up with the person you moved that damn mountain for in the first place!” René sees herself as having a purpose to combine her awesome comedic talent and her dynamic speaking ability, with her insightful personal journey to become a living testament to the power of laughter.

Now it is René's passion to be a beacon for others, through her laugh filled presentations. She uses her own many life experiences to demonstrate how humor can be enlisted in every area of life. Humor can be implemented as an aid in overcoming obstacles and coping with upheavals that everyone is bound to face in the course of a lifetime. Whether those obstacles and upheavals are of a life threatening nature or just life impeding, if you can find humor in a difficult situation, you're well on your way to finding a solution.” René is realizing her goal of illuminating others about the incredible results from the applications of laughter. She is also using her gift of humor to become a vocal and effective advocate for the prevention of tobacco use and for greater public awareness of the health related dangers from exposure to secondhand smoke, especially for children.