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## Monica Yant Kinney: Smoke-free a smart gamble



By Monica Yant Kinney

Inquirer Columnist

Out of habit, I inhale deeply, preparing for the worst as I walk into Delaware Park Casino, near Wilmington. But inside, the olfactory assault is unlike anything I've ever whiffed in a gambling hall.

It's deliciously decadent, so sweet I can practically feel myself gaining weight just trying to place the scent - vanilla? - wafting from the bakery/ice cream parlor next to the player services counter.

*You have to smell it to believe it*, Mike Miller Jr. insisted after inviting me on a road trip to the casino, where he and his friends regularly deposit part of their pension checks.

"We were hoping to gamble in Philly," he wrote. Just as foodies push locally grown produce, this player believes in slots sustainability. "I would like to spend my money in Pennsylvania."

But after legislators had the audacity to exempt Pennsylvania casinos from indoor-smoking laws, Mike vowed never to drop a dime at Harrah's, Foxwoods, or SugarHouse. He won't go to Atlantic City, either, because of the stench. So every month he meets friends from Chester County in the First State for a few hours of good, clean-air fun.

The players know the house always wins. But at least when they wager in Delaware, they don't lose their voices or their lunch.

### Laughing, not coughing

"I've been coming here for 15 years," Linda Poletto, 54, tells me as we reach the gaming floor. "In the beginning, it was awful. My mother smoked so much, I couldn't even sit with her when she played."

Delaware's 2002 indoor-smoking ban cleared the air overnight.

"All of a sudden, I could walk anywhere in the casino and not worry."

While Linda talks, Alice Kandravay feeds \$20 into the Stroke of Luck Super-Hot Jackpot slot machine. Three minutes later, she's busted.

"That," declares Alice, 66, "was the fastest I've ever lost." But at least she's laughing, not coughing.

Linda puts \$20 into the Hot Peppers machine. Soon her money's gone, too.

"I usually make donations to the State of Delaware," she jokes. In the old days, she might have choked while going broke.

Linda, Alice, and Mike, 62, met decades ago working for the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare. They had the good fortune to retire young, which is how they're free to goof off with me on a weekday afternoon.

Mike fumes at politicians and the casino industry for ignoring secondhand smoke's dangers and focusing only on profits and tax revenue.

"Eighty percent of the population doesn't smoke, so why not cater to the majority?" he asks. "Isn't that a better business model?"

"I think the casinos want addictive personality types," he sniffs. "If they can't stop smoking, they won't stop gambling."

### **The clean-air edge?**

With deep pockets funded by your losses, the casino industry successfully smokes most clean-air advocates with fear and intimidation.

"When Delaware first went smoke-free, there was great concern that this would be the demise of the casinos," recalls Deborah Brown of the American Lung Association. "A year later, we found *more* people working in the hospitality industry."

Today, Delaware's three smoke-free casinos are among only a handful nationwide. Delaware Park president Bill Fasy admits business is off of late, but says that's due to the economy and competition from Pennsylvania.

"That convenience market from Philadelphia or Delaware County is gone," he concedes. "But if you're a nonsmoker, you're going to come here. It's definitely a plus for us."

So, though revenue figures aren't ideal, morale is soaring.

"I just got done meeting some of our new dealers," Fasy shares. "My opening statement to them was: 'Here, you don't have to worry about standing in front of a player breathing in all that smoke.'"


Their response reminded him what's really at stake in the war over whose rights should reign around table games: "They all cheered."

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Reach me at [myant@phillynews.com](mailto:myant@phillynews.com) or 215-854-4670. Visit my web page and connect on Facebook and Twitter at [philly.com/kinney](http://philly.com/kinney).

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