

the Man Behind the Patch

BY ANGELA BURNETT

Frank Etscorn III ('71, '73) made a discovery so great, *People Magazine* compared it to Isaac Newton and the apple falling from the tree. But, for Dr. Etscorn, the invention came from a simple laboratory blunder.

In 1979, Etscorn conceived the idea of the nicotine patch after tripping in his laboratory and spilling liquid nicotine on his arm. An interest in what triggers vomiting — a problem astronauts face in orbit — led to experiments with placing liquid nicotine on rats.

Although he was a non-smoker, he felt as if he had chain-smoked several cigarettes. He sweated and felt nauseated. This prompted the idea that putting nicotine on the skin could be an effective way to get the chemical into the bloodstream and suppress smoking.

His only experience with cigarettes was a few puffs behind the barn when he was a kid in Franklin, Ky. He had always been curious, however, about the addictive effects of smoking.

"I was always fascinated that my wife would stop her Jane Fonda workout tape to smoke a cigarette, then start it back up," he said.

Dr. Etscorn's discovery has helped millions kick the habit. Among the people who have used the patch to stop smoking are Etscorn's wife, Sheri; his daughter, Keli; and his brother, John.



When the patch was perfected, Etscorn patented it, then sold it to Ciba-Geigy Pharmaceuticals of Switzerland. The patch is marketed under the names Habitrol and Equate.

In 1993, Etscorn was inducted into Western Kentucky University's Hall of Distinguished Alumni. The irony is he almost wasn't an alumnus. Etscorn finished last in his class at a Tennessee preparatory school and then flunked out of Western Kentucky University.

Interest in a psychology course sparked Etscorn's curiosity and prompted him to return to Western for a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in experimental psychology. He then went on to George Peabody College in Nashville for a doctorate in experimental psychology.

After graduating from Peabody, Dr. Etscorn accepted a position at New Mexico Tech as an assistant professor of psychology, becoming a full professor and dean of students in 1985. He received the University's Distinguished Teaching Award in 1990.

Dr. Etscorn has been awarded numerous honors for his discovery, including the first "New Mexico Inventor of the Year Award." The patch was hailed one of the best products of 1992 by *Time* and *Fortune* magazines.

Dr. Etscorn's research has been shown on Good Morning America, CBS News, The Today Show, ABC News, 20/20, NBC News, Prime Time and the Discovery Channel. It has also been featured in articles in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Etscorn now spends most of his time at his Wyoming ranch, living off the royalties he splits with New Mexico Tech.

He still conducts experiments, and has patented a way to keep wildlife from harming crops by using capsaicin, the active ingredient in chili peppers.

Another experiment on which he is currently working is to determine whether exposing children to secondhand smoke makes them more tolerant of nicotine if they start smoking themselves.

Etscorn still fights the war against smoking by working to educate high schoolers.

About 50 times a year, he visits with students to talk about the adverse effects of smoking. It may not seem important, but Etscorn knows you save people one person at a time.

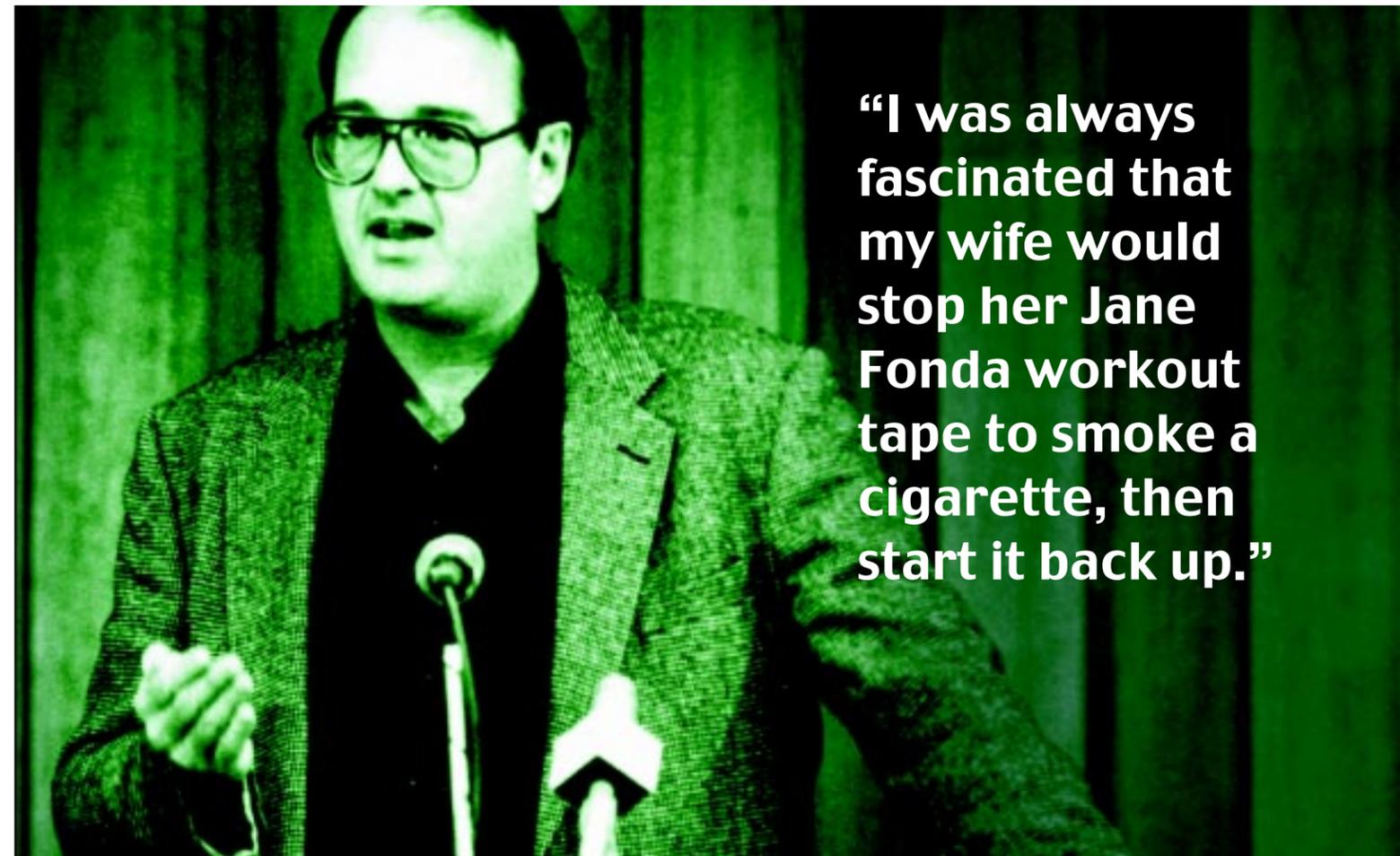
"Recently I visited a seventh grade class with only five students in it," he said. "But every little bit counts."

Persuading people not to smoke could cut down on his royalties, but money was never an object.

"There's no sense in pursuing money," he said. "You do what you enjoy."

He retired from New Mexico Tech in 1993 where he was dean of students and a professor of psychology. He currently lives with his wife of 34 years in the Rocky Mountains of Wyoming.

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