



Everything Jersey

Students rally against tobacco in Somerville

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By **Frank Mustac / Hunterdon County Democrat**



Photo by Frank Mustac About 200 students from 15 Somerset

County high school and middle schools rallied against tobacco in front of the Historic Somerville Courthouse on May 27.

The polite phrase "Thank you for not smoking" is not in their lexicon. Instead, their mantra bluntly suggests that no merchant anywhere ever sell cigarettes and other tobacco products again.

The mantra was heard loud and clear when some 200 Somerset County high school and middle school students shouted "NOT FOR SALE! NOT FOR SALE!" in front of the Historic Somerville Courthouse during a Wednesday late-morning rally in recognition of World No Tobacco Day.

Most if not all the students are members of their respective school's chapter of REBEL (Reaching Everyone by Exposing Lies), a New Jersey state-wide, grassroots, youth organization made up of teenagers working to reduce and prevent the use of tobacco products by their peers and members of the community.

"It's really a peer-to-peer movement where they're trying to impact their fellow students," said Lauren Connolly, the youth coordinator for REBEL in Somerset County.

Funded by the NJ Department of Health and coordinated through the Somerset Council on Alcohol and Drug Dependency, REBEL currently boasts more than 11,000 members in nearly 300 chapters statewide.

Connolly, who later delivered a prepared speech from a lectern placed on the courthouse steps, pointed out the thousand and more pairs of shoes spaced about two feet apart neatly arranged in row after row on the courthouse's front lawn.

"The students all collected the shoes, more than 1,200 pairs, that symbolize the number of lives lost everyday in the United States from a tobacco-related illnesses," she said. "So it's pretty powerful to just look out here and imagine people who would still be alive today standing in shoes like these. Instead their lives were lost because of tobacco-related diseases."

In Somerset County, lung and bronchus cancer comprise 10.3 percent or about one in 10, of all cancer cases and about 23 percent of all cancer deaths, said county Freeholder Jack Ciattarelli, also speaking at the lectern.

"I do have a feeling that we'll look back one day and see the sale of tobacco as maybe the worst commercial exploitation of the human race there ever was," he said, adding that county officials are "in the very beginning efforts of thinking about all of our Somerset public buildings and grounds going entirely smoke free."

Some have argued to Ciattarelli, he said, that government should not be involved in people's private lives.

"To me, as long as tax dollars are being used through Medicaid and Medicare programs to take care of people who are addicted to tobacco, it is a public health issue," Ciattarelli said.

Cancer survivor and longtime Immaculata High School teacher and athletic coach Pierce Frauenheim provided a firsthand account of how cigarette smoking resulted in the removal of his vocal cords by surgeons after he was diagnosed with cancer of the larynx 35 years ago at age 33.

"I was very dumb. I was not ignorant. I was stupid. I knew the dangers of tobacco," said Frauenheim, who breathes through a hole in his throat and speaks by way what is called esophageal speech in which he forcibly burps to pass air to his mouth to form audible words.

"I am one of the fortunate ones," he said. "I don't want you to be dumb like I was. I don't want you to be stupid."

"Never start smoking!" Frauenheim said. "For those you know who already started, you encourage them to stop."

One of the ways teenagers are introduced to smoking is through cigarette advertising, said Kassandra "Kassi" Wilson, a senior at Somerville High School and the head of her school's REBEL chapter.

"They try to make it look cool, and with the different cigarette flavors they offer I can see why younger kids would want to do it," she said.

"We're trying to tell them that it's not worth it and they shouldn't get started with it."

To illustrate the prevalence of smoking, eight area students went out on May 21 to clean up some of the smoking related refuse in the streets and parking lots of Somerville. They collected more than 2,500 cigarette butts within just one one hour.

One of the students, Christine Liaw, a senior at Watchung Hills Regional High School, said that there can be a lot of resistance on the part of her peers and others to stop smoking.

"I think a lot of people misunderstand what we're all about," said Liaw, who founded her school's REBEL chapter and participates within the organization at the county and state levels.

"I've heard comments that we're a fascist group that is trying to reduce free speech, but it's nothing like that," she said. "We're promoting healthy life styles. We're really just trying to promote our cause and to help our peers understand that tobacco really is deadly and something to avoid at all costs."

For more about REBEL, visit njrebel.org.

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