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Section: News

Former cigarette pitchman talks to kids about the dangers of tobacco

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"My job was to get kids to smoke. I was paid to make smoking look good."

That was the message internationally known actor, producer, model, public speaker and educator Dave Goerlitz brought to Ardmore Middle School students Tuesday morning. Goerlitz was the lead "Winston Man" in R.J. Reynolds' lucrative "Search and Rescue" ad series which moved Winston cigarettes from No. 4 to No. 2 in worldwide sales. In 1988, he took an historic stand against the tobacco industry for targeting young people to increase sales.

"For a lot of years, I was paid to make this garbage look good," Goerlitz told students. "I was paid \$100,000 a year to make tobacco appealing. Tobacco kills more people in this nation than anything else, and young people are still finding ways to get it illegally. We make a product that kills people, then we try to make it look good. We are a country where everything has to look good."

One of the biggest problems, according to Goerlitz, is the fact that tobacco is often overshadowed by other issues.

"We have all these other issues in our country like AIDS, crack and heroin, racism, child abuse, Iraq and Britney Spears," Goerlitz said.

"How we feel about tobacco is way down at the bottom of our list of concerns.

"We make progress in a lot of other areas," he said. "We have new security laws that make it longer to get through airports. We have seat-belt laws so children don't go flying through the windshield. We have helmet laws for children so they don't crack their skulls. We have new, safer playgrounds so children don't get hurt. Yet, minors still have easy access to tobacco products."

Goerlitz said children are being exposed to tobacco use at very early ages.

"We still have candy cigarettes for our 5-year-olds to rehearse with," he said. "We still have Big League Chewing Gum for our boys. How different our view would be if our kids were coming up with ideas like playing wet bar. Wouldn't that be adorable? Kids sitting on little bar stools playing with little shot glasses. A little 6-year-old coming home from school asking Mom if she wants a martini. That's insane, right? Well what about the fact that our kids are playing with candy cigarettes and Big League Chewing Gum? We are absolutely nuts."

Goerlitz encouraged students to take the dangers of tobacco use seriously.

"The warning on cigarette packs may as well say 'Smoking causes blah blah blah blah blah,'" he said. "That is about as serious as we take the nation's No. 1 cause of death. That is about as serious as we take the rate of 1,200 people dying every day. Would you ever buy a bottle of shampoo that said 'If you use this product it will make your hair fall out?' Would you ever buy a roll of toilet paper that had a warning on it? I guarantee you wouldn't."

Goerlitz also reminded students that tobacco companies are concerned with one thing, and one thing only.

"Cigarettes in New York cost eight dollars a pack," he said. "Here in Oklahoma, they cost three or four dollars. It costs 6 cents to make a pack of cigarettes. Tobacco companies don't care about you, they care about your money."

Students were asked to keep their minds open and to use some common sense.

"You need to set your goals high and keep your options open," Goerlitz said. "The only thing tobacco does is cause you to lose your options. I am here because 93 percent of smokers start in the sixth, seventh and eighth grades, and tobacco companies know this. You have to set high goals and you have to work toward them. Hope is not a strategy, you have to do stuff. Go after the things that you want as long as they are healthy and legal and moral. But don't turn your life over to tobacco. The only thing tobacco will do is take away your goals."

The program is presented by the Carter County Tobacco Use Prevention Coalition, a part of **Turning Point**, through a grant from the Oklahoma Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust.

In addition to Ardmore Middle School, Goerlitz was also scheduled to speak at Plainview Middle School and Springer Schools on Tuesday. Today he is scheduled to speak at Healdton Schools, Plainview High School and Fox Schools.