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Group wins ... No butts about it

A push to prevent smoking in Muskogee parks has garnered an award from a statewide health initiative and coalition.

Approximately a year after they began working on a measure to prevent smoking in city parks, the Muskogee Against Tobacco (MAT) coalition was filmed in Honor Heights Park.

The footage will be displayed while MAT receives a "Community Champions" award from statewide health initiative and coalition Turning Point on Sept. 11 during the group's 15th annual Forum/Policy Day.



Muskogee Against Tobacco spent approximately a year pushing for a measure preventing smoking in city-owned parks. After the measure was passed, signs like this one went up in Honor Heights Park.

Children played on the playground and in the fountain Thursday near signs that declared "Young Lungs At Play," while a cameraman interviewed MAT members about their work—with not a single cigarette butt in sight.

MAT member Ched Wetz, who will accept the award on the group's behalf, said the honor made him proud.

Wetz said the group began its work when they noticed how many parents spent their time smoking while their children played in the park, and how smokers disposed of their cigarettes.

"People would sit and flick cigarette butts onto the ground," he said.

Thanks to work from both MAT and Muskogee High School's Students Working Against Tobacco (SWAT) chapter, however, the park was cleaned up and kept that way, Wetz said.

"We were successful, and that's really great, especially for our kids," he said. "I'm excited to have been part of that."

SWAT president and Muskogee High student Derra Walker is excited too, she said.

"It feels great to see progress made step by step and to see something done," Walker said. It's awesome to know that kids won't be exposed to smoking like this."

SWAT visited not only Honor Heights, but Civitan and Spaulding Parks as well, cleaning as they went.

"We went to three places, so it took a long time," Walker said. "There were so many cigarette butts."

However, their success made the whole effort worth it, she said.

"It's kind of like, we've started with tobacco-free parks, and now in the bigger picture we might have tobacco free restaurants and so on," Walker said. It makes you feel like you're part of something bigger than yourself, and it's one more step toward making our lives better."

The measure against smoking in parks was a special victory for Derr's mother, D'Elbie Walker, who serves as prevention coordinator for Muskogee and Sequoyah counties under the Oklahoma State Health Department.

"My grandfather died from smoking," D'Elbie Walker said. "He smoked cigars for years, but even after he stopped, his best friends all smoked, and exposed him every day to it."

From that experience, she said, Walker was motivated to help people stop smoking and prevent children from starting.

"It's a passion to help people who want to stop smoking but have an addiction," she said. "And we don't want little kids to ever start. We want them to be protected."

The Turning Point honor gave her a "sense of pride," Walker said.

"Everyone's worked really hard, and our team is being recognized," she said. "This work we've done to try and protect people."