

Middle school students use power of knowledge to fight tobacco companies

By Mark Francis

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Students Working Against Tobacco members of Lone Grove Middle School displayed information for their peers Monday explained the dangers of tobacco usually withheld by manufacturers.

Students placed empty containers of paint thinner, glass cleaner, gasoline, nail polish remover and formaldehyde, among other hazardous items, along the stage in the cafetorium showing the chemicals used in those items and how they are linked to tobacco.

Kayli Johnson, 12, Lone Grove Middle School seventh grade SWAT member, said she was surprised to learn, along with other students, that there are as many as 4,000 different chemicals in only one cigarette.

Johnson said she has also learned smokeless tobacco includes three times more chemicals than cigarettes. A single "dip" has 16,000 chemicals, which are absorbed directly into the human system. She said tobacco companies don't offer that information.

"They don't realize this is killing them," Johnson said. "And learning it at this age is a good idea, but we're not against the smokers, only the tobacco companies."

SWAT's goal is to change current attitudes about tobacco and empower America's youth to unite in the resistance of the harmful product. At the same time, SWAT works to expose what tobacco companies do not openly share -- the truth.

Sally Mitchell, SWAT adult partner, said tobacco use causes the premature death of about 6,000 Oklahomans each year, or an average of 16 each day and that tobacco companies are seeking younger smokers to stay in business.

"We know they are targeting us (adults)," Mitchell said. "Now they want our children to fill those shoes."

Steven Pyle, Lone Grove Middle School seventh grade geography teacher, said the students are learning and relaying information that wasn't available to his generation or generations before.

Pyle said the students' interest in the issue is becoming a personal battle, and they work to get material about tobacco out to their peers. He said middle school students are taking a stand, which is an indication of their generation's mindset.

"I think this is the group of the future for not getting into drugs," Pyle said. "They are real aware of the world and they might surprise us. This is the group to watch out for."

Janie Horton, Carter County Turning Point Tobacco Coalition coordinator, agreed with Pyle and said students are learning that they are being targeted by tobacco companies. And they are fighting back.

Horton said to get the attention of youths, the strategy includes showing students the chemicals used in tobacco and stating the number of deaths which occur as a result of tobacco use. She said for many students, it takes more than viewing the black lung of a 60-year-old afflicted with lung disease.

"You can't not talk about health issues," Horton said. "But they are learning that the tobacco companies are trying to make them smokers so they will buy their product."

Mitchell, who visits schools in Ardmore, Plainview, Wilson, Healdton and Fox, said the Lone Grove Middle School SWAT organization began in January and students have taken their new found knowledge and are representing it to friends and family.

"They didn't know all the information and we weren't raised to know it," Mitchell said. "Ammonia in tobacco is what makes nicotine addictive."

Johnson said she thought tobacco was only a plant to be used for cigarettes and smokeless products.

"I didn't know it had anything in it," Johnson said. "And pretty much the whole school is working against the tobacco companies. We want a drug free school."