

Published March 03, 2007 12:00 am - Teens ticketed for smoking get a lesson

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Up in smoke

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Two cups of thick, viscous hair gel.

That's how thick and how much mucus builds in the lungs of a person suffering from emphysema in one day.

This is what Teresa Collado, an employee of the United Way agency NAIC, showed a group of teenagers in her class.

"One day?" one of them asked. "Gross!"

Spending four hours in a seminar-style class is the last way an average teen hopes to spend their Saturday morning. However, if they are caught smoking that might just be what they will be doing.

In collaboration with the Cleveland County Turning Point and Tobacco Free Cleveland County, the NAIC is providing free 4-hour classes, hoping to fight tobacco use among teens. The Tobacco Education Group (TEG) is a free tobacco education program for children ages 12 to 17, whose curriculum NAIC uses.

The program is funded through a grant from the Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust. Collado is the associate director of the program.

The City of Norman's attorney's office, which is a partner of the Tobacco Free Cleveland County, originated the program in 2002, and later requested NAIC take over the classes in January of 2006.

"We came into a some-what of a training issue," Jayme Rowe, a legal administrative technician with the city attorney's office said. With the help of NAIC, they attorney's office could continue the program without any complications.

Now the attorney's office refer juveniles with tobacco citations to the TEG program. After the session, the teens report back to the judge with a certificate showing they have completed the course.

"We decided that rather than punish them, we'd like to educate them," Rowe said. The program is only offered to first-time offenders, but Rowe said the city doesn't get a lot of repeat offenders.

"(The number of teens in each class) is rather small," Collado said. "Because the city has been handing out less citations than they used to."

According to Rowe, in the FY03, which is when the City Attorney's office began the program, there were 348 tobacco citations issued.? This past year, FY06, there were 126 tobacco citations issued.

"It's a slow process, but we're making changes," Candida Manion, with Tobacco Free Cleveland Country, said. "Our goal is changing social norms, changing cultural attitudes toward tobacco."

So every month, Collado and about six other facilitators hold the classes. The classes are interactive, providing the students with hands-on activities and lots of discussion, Collado said.

Some of the activities include breathing through a coffee stirrer, with their noses plugged for one minute, to stimulate how much oxygen an emphysema patient gets with each breath.

The teens discuss everything from how they got involved, why they continue and if they will ever quit smoking. While they are there, they are in a "safe zone" -- what's said in the room, stays in the room.

The program also teaches refusal skills and attempts to dispel the myth that everyone is using tobacco.

"We're hoping that kids in the class learn there is a law, and realize this is an addictive product ... and letting them know the long-term consequences," Manion said.

While the class was originally meant for youth referred by the attorney's office, the program is also open to teens whose parents want them to receive tobacco education. Parents are also welcome to sit in.

"I know it's mandatory for the ones with citations," Manion said. "But we're hoping parents will send their kids (voluntarily)."

In this particular class, there are four teens, the years they've been smoking ranging from 1 to 5 years, and each teen averages smoking 2 to 5 cigarettes a day. None of them are over the age of 16.

Most of them say their biggest influences, in regards to smoking, are their parents. However, friends and other family members have had a big effect on them as well.

According to Collado, 54 percent of 10th graders have smoked at some point in their lives and 28.4 percent have smoked within the last 30 days.

Many of the kids says images on TV led them to want to smoke as well. Seeing someone on screen light a cigarette makes them want to light up too. Even the Truth Commission, the commercials sponsored by tobacco companies to teach the dangers of and discourage smoking, make their desire stronger.

"One of the students said he suspected they were funded by tobacco companies cause it doesn't encourage him to stop," Collado said. "It just makes him want to smoke more."

Through videos, workbooks and activities, Collado teaches these teens about the negative physical, social, emotional and financial consequences of smoking. From learning there are about 4,000 different chemicals in tobacco to the different health risks involved, they learn it all.

They are all paying attention. They remain respectful. They answer all of Collado's questions and open up to her. And they are definitely disgusted, scared and even moved by some of the facts and true life stories they hear.

But do any of them want to quit?

No.

Not one of them.

Each of the teens say value the few benefits over any of the reasons why they shouldn't smoke. It relieves the stress they feel from home or school, it helps them relax, makes them look cool. For girls, it kills their appetite, keeping them skinny. For boys, it's a chance to disrespect authority.

It doesn't matter that they could get cancer, lung or heart disease, make them age rapidly, or act as a gateway drug. Right now they are young, and they don't mind taking the risk.

The lack of desire to quit doesn't phase Collado. She hands them her card, as well as tips, for if they ever decide to quit and they are allowed to take their workbooks home.

She said she doesn't expect any of them to make a change any time soon; partly because the environment that got them into it in the first place won't change and partly because it takes more than just a class.

"It's just more than education," Collado said. "And I think this is more of just a consequence for their actions."

But she sees it as a start. Collado and Rowe said NAIC, the city attorney's office and Tobacco Free Cleveland County are hoping to take children through this program before they even begin smoking. As part of this plan, they hope to contact schools and figure out a way to bring the program into classrooms as early as grade school.

"The goal is to try to hit them when they're a little bit younger, and from different angles," Rowe said. "The problem with cessation is you have to want to quit ... it's a pretty major commitment on the part of the teen."

"It's more than just education," Collado said. "This is just a small part of what I hope to do."