

Tips for teens on resisting smoking

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Teens need prevention, critical-thinking skills and self-esteem, Dr. Peter DeBenedittis said, to resist powerful pro-smoking messages from tobacco companies.

DeBenedittis is a nationally known media literacy expert from New Mexico and a former advertising executive. He spoke recently to students from across North Carolina who came to the Embassy Suites in Greensboro to help put a plan into action for their own schools concerning the use of tobacco by teens.

The event was the PEACE Tobacco Summit, an acronym for Peers Effectively Advocating for Change Everywhere.

"We think that teens know most of what they need to know about tobacco," said Michelle Gill-Moffatt, a teen tobacco prevention advocate and a health educator for the Guilford County Department of Public Health.

"They know its health effects, and they know they shouldn't do it," she said. "We want them to learn how to be effective agents of change."

DeBenedittis and other speakers emphasized how the tobacco industry targets youths through ads, movies, music and television.

Teens also learned ways to use the media to publicize the health risks of smoking, and they learned tactics for changing tobacco policies in their local communities.

"Youth empowerment is extremely important to teen tobacco-use prevention," said Bronwyn Lucas, regional coordinator for Question Why, one of the sponsors of the event.

"All too often, our teens are under the misconception that they are too young to make a difference when, in reality, their messages can be some of the most powerful," she said.

DeBenedittis was the event's keynote speaker, lecturing on how youths are targeted by the tobacco industry.

Using advertisements and video clips from movies, commercials and television, he showed the various ways tobacco is depicted in the media and explained how such images subtly influence teens' decisions to use tobacco.

A comical example was a scene from the movie "Men in Black," in which aliens take a stack of

Marlboro cigarettes.

In another clip, this one from "Erin Brockovich," starring Julia Roberts, the main character relieves her stress constantly by smoking, giving teens the idea that smoking is a proper way to relieve stress, DeBenedittis said.

On-screen images of tobacco are not new.

The cigarette industry has been glamorizing smoking for more than 50 years, dating back to "I Love Lucy" and even former president and actor Ronald Reagan, DeBenedittis said.

DeBenedittis shared some grim statistics about the tobacco industry, cigarette use and tobacco-related deaths:

- 3 million deaths every year are the result of cigarette smoking.
- Tobacco companies make an estimated profit of \$3.25 for every \$3.50 pack of cigarettes sold.
- One-third of smokers don't stop until they die, and the other two-thirds take an average of 11 years to quit.

Angelica Davis, a senior at Page High School, is on the Guilford County Tobacco Use Prevention Coalition's youth advisory board. She plans to use what she learned at the tobacco summit to develop programs at her school to help teens stop smoking and to prevent others from starting.

She spent last summer talking to young people about smoking and plans to continue trying to make an impact in her community.

Julie Drinkard, 17, is a senior at Greensboro Day School.

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