

I wrote the following “grant story” as part of the final grant report for WNWSU’s school-based tobacco grant for the 2015-16 school year. In my capacity as Community Outreach Coordinator for Health Connections of the Upper Valley, I served as WNWSU’s grant coordinator for the academic year. The write-up below explains Bethel students’ participation in “Kick Butts Day.”

Bethel Students “Kick Butts” Exposing Big Tobacco Marketing

By Laurie Smith, Tobacco Grant Coordinator

Clotheslines are an unusual site in the main thoroughfare of school buildings but, this past March, the seventh grade students of Whitcomb Jr./Sr. High School erected a clothesline outside their bustling cafeteria to teach their peers about how tobacco companies target children. T-shirts strung across the line included quotes like, ““Today’s teenage smoker is tomorrow’s potential regular customer,” and “Pre-smokers.” A poster explained that the shirts were meant for “Airing Big Tobacco’s Dirty Laundry.” Along with peers across the country, the students were participating in “Kick Butts Day,” a national anti-tobacco youth advocacy campaign that encourages kids to speak out against tobacco companies.

Bethel students discovered the importance of speaking up about tobacco during education sessions conducted through a partnership with Health Connections of the Upper Valley. A trained tobacco treatment specialist worked with 86 students in grades 5 – 12 to examine the chemicals in cigarettes and the ever-growing list of tobacco products as well as the health and financial effects of using tobacco. Middle and high school students also spent time analyzing tobacco advertising, understanding hidden messages in ads, and brainstorming ways to reduce tobacco use. Seventh grade students took their knowledge one step further by reviewing dense tobacco memos in search of references to youth, then filling their clothesline with the quotes they found most surprising and disturbing. Students also completed “selfie statements” that read “I am not a replacement [smoker], I am . . .” with their own responses ranging from “a

joker” to “an athlete” to “a gamer.” The selfie statements were uploaded to social media and placed prominently around the students’ clothesline.

The need for the sort of truth-telling led by Bethel’s students is clear: 90% of tobacco users get hooked during their teenage years, leading to a lifetime of health problems; one in three of those teens will die as a direct result of their tobacco use (tobaccoatlas.org). As teenage experimentation morphs quickly into life-long addiction, tobacco users continue to enrich the companies that already spend \$26 million dollars a day marketing their products. In Bethel, 23% of high school students reported ever smoking an entire cigarette (2013 YRBS WNW Supervisory Union), a sure sign that tobacco companies’ targeting of youth has been successful. Although the overall smoking rate for high school students in the area is 14% (YRBS), the availability of 120 varieties of cigarettes and 78 varieties of chewing tobacco in Bethel convenience stores (Counter Tools store audit 2014) means that Bethel children are bombarded with opportunities to begin using tobacco.

Hopefully, tobacco education and special events like Kick Butts Day will equip Bethel children with powerful knowledge and skills to combat the marketing schemes of Big Tobacco. With the seventh graders’ clothesline draped outside the school cafeteria for a month, all the students at Bethel Elementary and Whitcomb Jr./Sr. High School , as well as the many staff members, families, and community members who viewed the project, now understand just how hard tobacco companies are working to capture the youth market. In a positive sign that Bethel’s tobacco education efforts built confidence and resolve to reduce youth tobacco use, one student wrote on her selfie statement, “I am not a replacement [smoker] . . . I am amazing!”