

SWAT SISTERS

Passing the torch

EXTINGUISHER

By Stephanie Reck, Editor

Kassie Alexander faced it with her grandfather, and Ericka Bancks faced it with both her parents. Neither one backed down from the fight, and in her own way, each won.

Alexander, a 2002 graduate of **Pedro Menendez High School**, and Bancks, a senior at **St. Joseph's Academy**, both in St. Augustine, got involved with Students Working Against Tobacco (SWAT) because of family members who used tobacco. Alexander served as the chairman of the St. Johns County SWAT organization for the past year, as well as the state vice-chair for education and training. She'll be succeeded this year by Bancks as the county chair, who also is chair of St. Joseph's SWAT organization, a group Alexander founded there before transferring to Pedro Menendez.

"The reason I got started in SWAT was because of my grandfather," Alexander says. "He passed away from a tobacco-related disease. A lot of people would say that he lost his fight with tobacco. I say he's just given the battle to me to fight." Alexander credits SWAT with giving her more than just a way to remember a dear relative. "This is my life's mission, not only to fight tobacco, but to make sure that teens know that advocacy can change their lives."

Alexander has been involved since 1998, so by the time she took on the job of being St. Johns County SWAT chair, she knew what needed to be accomplished. Since SWAT's mission is to inform students about the dangers of tobacco use and Environmental Tobacco Smoke (ETS, or "second-hand" smoke), she created the "Tobacco 101 and Surviving ETS" program with Anna Galas, the state education and training contract manager. The program is used by counties across the state to educate SWAT members, especially when dealing with state legislators.

No lying down on the job: Kassie Alexander passes the mantle of leadership of St. Johns County SWAT to Ericka Bancks.

"We created the Tobacco 101 presentation to get every SWAT member on the same page," she says. "When I go to talk to my state legislator, I can use the same facts and figures as the chairman from down in Dade County, and we hit them with the same information in a uniform manner."

Alexander's uniform manner and well-organized style are strengths that Bancks plans to continue as she enters the county

the organization. "Some people get involved for the fun activities, but most people join because they want to do something, and they can go to conferences and learn, they can get petitions signed, and, of course, they can have fun, too."

Not many high school seniors speak with authority about a budget of \$39 million (recently cut by \$10 million) or about how to get grassroots local support for a state ballot initiative or ideas for a statewide ad campaign (the "Truth" ad campaign was created by SWAT), but these women are working for a larger cause that carries greater potential rewards and casualties than what average high school students choose to care about. "I want to be a leader, and SWAT has given me capabilities to be a great one," Alexander says. "Otherwise, at this stage, I don't know that I would have had this kind of direction."

"Kassie has held almost every position in our organization, taken advantage of every training, volunteered at and chaired most of our anti-tobacco events, and become an articulate spokesperson for our efforts," says Nancy Birchall, the St. Johns County SWAT coordinator. "What I admire about Kassie is that she never quit,

Ways to Shine in SWAT

1. Volunteer to speak to younger youth at community centers, YMCA, or church groups about not using tobacco products. Little kids look up to big kids.

2. Organize a drawing at your school for all students who sign a pledge to stay smoke-free. The winner gets some cool SWAT gear. (Free gear is available at all Florida Health Department locations.)

3. Encourage your friends who smoke to get the facts and not be a target of the manipulation of the tobacco industry.

4. Write letters to the editor or offer to do an article for your local city or school paper about the issue



of teen smoking and the manipulation of the tobacco industry.

5. Help get the word out about "Amendment 6." This amendment will make every indoor airspace in Florida smoke-free except bars and private homes. Design some big signs to hold them up like candidates do who are running for public office.

6. Let your friends know what you know about tobacco. Get more information by visiting some anti-tobacco web sites such as www.wholetruth.com.

7. Call the sheriff's office and see if you can help with a "sting" operation that checks to see if retailers are selling tobacco to minors.

—compiled by Nancy Birchall

chair this fall. "I want to be sure that Tobacco 101 is kept current and available in all counties," Bancks says.

Bancks came to be a SWAT member for a reason similar to Alexander's. "Both of my parents have always been cigarette smokers, so when I found SWAT, I knew it was a way to keep other people from starting," she says. And Bancks' story has a happier ending. "My father has cut down and my mother has actually quit," she says.

Many of the programs that Alexander has helped create, Bancks plans to expand and improve on. The programs in the county have included everything from the Reindeer Run—a fundraiser done with the Ancient City Road Runners—to a skim-board competition, to working at the annual cancer-awareness event, Relay for Life. Because of this variety, Bancks stresses that she wants all students to feel like there's a niche available for them in

and she let herself develop and grow."

In organizing her final St. Johns County SWAT Leadership Conference, Alexander said she gave the assembled group a statistic she hoped would spur them to action, and it's a set of numbers she says she'll carry with her to **Florida State University** this fall. "On September 11, we had terrorists take thousands of lives. Tobacco takes the same number of lives every two days—9/11, 9/13, 9/15, 9/17—and so on," she says. "Let's wage war on tobacco. That's what I plan to lead with—the facts and the information we need to fight it and fight it hard." 🦋

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