

SWAT TEAM

Defending St. Johns County against tobacco

By Ryan Greenbaum

It's a beautiful day outside. The birds are singing. The only cloud in the sky is the one coming from a huddle of teenagers surrounded by gray wisps of tobacco smoke.

Some people, heck, most people would go about their business and not give the toxic gathering another thought. However, there are an increasing number of students that make it their business and pass the word on about the dangers of smoking. They're members of a group that has hit Florida like a firestorm and has

tobacco companies looking for a new age demographic to buy their products. Students Working Against Tobacco (SWAT) is working to reduce the number of teenage smokers in Florida.

"At [Pedro Menendez High School] in St. Augustine, we have thirty-some members," says Kyle Masters, a St. Johns County SWAT officer. "But countywide, we have over 500, and statewide, we have about 54,000." Just four years ago, he says, St. Johns County's original eight members were among only 300 at the first tobacco summit.

According to the St. Johns County SWAT web site, smoking has dropped 47

percent among middle-school students and 31 percent among high school students since SWAT was started. "The mission of SWAT is to educate, unite, and empower the diverse segments of youth in Florida to revolt against the manipulation of minors by Big Tobacco through the use of the Truth message," the web site says.

Many schools have incorporated SWAT with other, more established programs within the school to pass on their message. Nease High School in St. Augustine has brought SWAT to the attention of other students by advertising it through a student-to-student guidance program. It also is associated with a national sister group, SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions).

The SWAT team at Pedro Menendez tries to create memorable ways to promote its good intentions. "Recently, we did a jazz funeral, where people who've had relatives die from tobacco-related illnesses come out and hold pictures," Masters says. "We had jazz musicians and were escorted by the police and carried coffins through downtown."

Being a part of this organization is important to Masters because, like a lot of the students in the group, tobacco has played a big part in the lives of those close to him. "I had my grandma die from lung cancer," says Masters, whose sister was an inaugural SWAT member (see story on p.13). "My grandpa has been recently diagnosed with lung cancer, and that's why I like to stay active."

SWAT team in action: St. Johns County SWAT members (from left) John Regan, Kassie Alexander, Josh Powell, James Glenos, Kyle Masters and 2002 Chairman Ericka Bancks discuss their plan of action to defend their generation against tobacco companies and their advertising.



James Glenos, a sophomore at **The Bolles School** in Jacksonville, who already is serving as vice chair of media for St. Johns County SWAT, has showcased his abilities as a leader in numerous ways.

"We hold events such as dances and skate competitions with the intention to attract youth and get an anti-tobacco message out," Glenos says.



"Also, I have designed a web site for our county, which gives anyone access to SWAT information."

Glenos is a firm believer that

SWAT is not only sending a good message, but that it's an excellent leadership opportunity. "SWAT is a great organization," he says. "By joining, you not only save other people's lives but also develop the leadership skills you will use your whole life."

In using its "Truth" advertising campaign, SWAT is trying to send out more than just the message that tobacco is bad; it's an attempt to teach young people how to avoid manipulation that they will encounter in everyday life. "I think people start because of the advertising," Masters says. "[Tobacco companies] want the kids, so because people are dying off, they advertise using cartoons like Joe Camel and cool cowboys like the Marlboro Man, and that influences people, especially kids."

The feeling among the SWAT team is that you can't start too young, so they concentrate much of their efforts on reaching younger kids. Reaching toward the next generation, along with Masters at Pedro Menendez, is Kassie Alexander, the exiting state vice chair of education and training and St. Johns County SWAT chair. "We try to go into the classrooms as much as possible because this is what we truly believe that the success of a student is a battle fought in the classroom," says Alexander (see story on p.7).

Alexander likes to go back to her old kindergarten class and be the mentor she never had. "I know that had someone come in and talked to me, knowing that they are older and wiser, it would have helped me out a lot," she says.

By working as role models toward younger students, the SWAT members are molding the minds of the next generation. Although the message is being sent to the youngest kids in school, one of the requirements for becoming SWAT members is that they have to be in the

See additional coverage of St. Johns County SWAT at www.floridaleader.com

Life After SWAT

Students can STRIKE during college

Students Working Against Tobacco (SWAT) was founded on the basis of empowering youth and developing a pilot program that would take into consideration the needs of those youth. The program is geared to middle and high school students, and their mission is to educate those students to revolt against the manipulation of minors by the tobacco companies. SWAT has proven to be a strong anti-tobacco initiative at this level, but until recently, no college counterpart existed.

Dr. Antoinette Meeks, coordinator for the College Advocacy Initiative of the Florida Department of Health, Division of Health Awareness and Tobacco, posed an important question, "What should be done about SWAT members who are graduating and going to Florida colleges and universities and still want to be involved with the mission of the program?" The answer was the Student Tobacco Reform Initiative: Knowledge for Eternity (STRIKE), which was developed by the Initiative for the 1999-2000 school year.

So what about students over 18? Almost 33 percent of college students report either smoking cigarettes or using smokeless tobacco. STRIKE went to work initially at two community colleges and four universities. In its second year the program grew to include three more four-year institutions. "We try to add three sites each year," Meeks says. "We want to make sure that we maintain quality as we increase in terms of quantity."

Like SWAT, STRIKE's enemies are the tobacco companies. They hope to "strike" a blow against them by providing college students with the facts about tobacco, such as what it does and whom the tobacco industry targets. STRIKE has adopted three goals in its efforts:

- 1) to increase awareness of Big Tobacco and its harmful effects

- 2) to increase prevalence of tobacco cessation (quitting tobacco use)
- 3) to increase the number of students involved in these tobacco prevention and cessation activities.

These goals all tie into the final goal of changing college and university policies to ensure that Florida's campuses will become tobacco-free. In 2001-2002, STRIKE had chapters at **Central Florida Community College, Florida A&M University, Florida Gulf Coast University, Florida International University, Florida State University, Indian River Community College, Miami-Dade Community College, North Florida Community College, Palm Beach Community College, Pasco-Hernando Community College, the University of Central Florida, the University of Florida, the University of North Florida, and the University of West Florida.** Three more sites are to be added to that list for the 2002-2003 school year.

Each campus employs programs based on the needs and interests of the campus. "[STRIKE leaders] have to know their student populations because they're looking at the needs of those individuals in whatever they develop," Meeks says.

For example, FIU hosts a national speaker each semester, while "Butts on Display" at FSU lets students guess the number of cigarette butts in a dramatic exhibit. This initiative supports anti-tobacco efforts as well as helps students to see how unattractive discarded cigarettes can make the campus look. At PHCC, STRIKE started the "Tobacco Game Show." At UCF,

"Stress Busters" is an event designed to alleviate stress before exams without the aid of tobacco products. UCF also has a Cigarette Trade-In/Music Café Day that is used as an incentive to get students to trade in their packs of cigarettes to receive an item supporting tobacco cessation.

—By Risa G. Merl



sixth grade or higher.

"The reason we as leaders are effective is because we're going in and talking to kids," says Swati Sikaria, vice chair of activities for St. John's County SWAT. "They can associate with us and they know we're not that much older than them."

One of the most influential aspects of the group is the difference between the message it sends to the younger crowds and another they might have heard from other groups.

"DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) might be effective to some kids, but the reason why we're so powerful is that we don't tell people, 'No, you can't do that,'" Alexander says. "We give them the information and let them decide for themselves. I love that we save lives, not by telling someone they can't do something, but by empowering them to take a stand." 🐦

Visit St. John's County SWAT at www.sjcswat.com or statewide at www.gen-swat.com.