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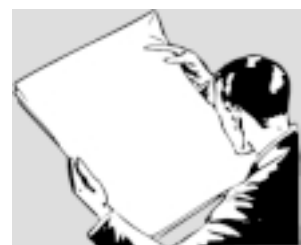
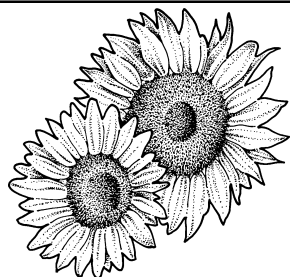
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Students at Central Elementary School competed in an anti-tobacco poster contest earlier this month. Adrian Conde, youth group sponsor, was at the top of the pyramid. The top three poster contestants in the fourth grade were in the middle row, left to right: Day Waugh, Nathan Deeds and Seth Miller. The bottom row, left to right: Cris Lovington, Director of the Prevention Center; third grade top three: Reed Bellamy, Albert Mouchette and Morgan Powell; and Crisy Hernandez, youth group chair.
Photos by Sharon Corcoran/The Goodland Daily News

Group teaches youths dangers of tobacco

By Sharon Corcoran
The Goodland Daily News

The Motivation + Achievement = Success (M.A.S.) Youth Group was awarded a \$10,000 grant and has used the money to spread the word about the dangers of tobacco use. The group has had information in a booth at the fair, the Fall Flatlander Festival and the Kanorado Octoberfest, put on a program for Central Elementary School students and has made a commercial that is airing on the local CBS television station.

After the program at the school, Director of the Regional Prevention Center Cris Lovington said, the students competed in a poster contest. The teenagers in the youth group were nervous about teaching the younger kids, she said, as they had mostly worked with junior high kids before.

But it went well, Lovington said. The kids seemed to really enjoy the contest, she said, and won footballs, soccer balls, cameras and gift certificates from Wal-Mart for the top three prizes in third and in fourth grade.

The hard part was choosing the winners, Lovington said, as all the posters were so good.

When writing up the proposal for the grant, she said, the teenagers wanted to help elementary school students but didn't know how to go about it. One kid had the idea for a poster contest, Lovington said, and she e-mailed all the elementary teachers asking if their students would want to participate.

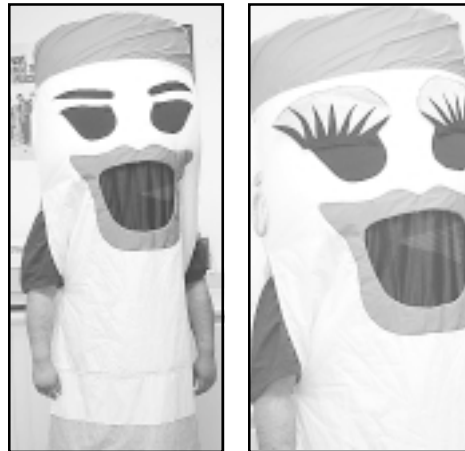
Central Elementary Principal Sharon Gregory responded, Lovington said, and suggested the group do a program at the school before the contest.

"I was glad because that's what we originally thought," Lovington said, "but we didn't want to be pushy."

A family member dressed up as "Mr. Butthead" for the program, she said, and came out telling the kids he wouldn't harm them. The teenagers warned of the dangers of smoking, she said, and a clown roped "Mr. Butthead" and dragged him out of the school with the students cheering him on.

The grant money was part of the settlements from big tobacco companies, she said, and has been used to educate students about the dangers of smoking. The smoke alone has over 40,000 chemicals in it, Lovington said, and the nicotine is tar that would have to be scraped off with a chisel.

"With what nicotine does," she said, "it's amazing people put this into their bodies." It's hard to convince high school students



"Mr. Butthead" appeared at Central Elementary School as part of the Motivation + Achievement = Success Youth Group's campaign against tobacco. The costume, made by a Colby woman, can be converted to "Ms. Butthead" with the aid of earrings and eyelashes with blue eyeshadow above them.

that they have to worry about their health deteriorating, she said, because they think they are going to live forever. So the group also focuses on showing students what they could do with the money they would spend on cigarettes, she said.

For the last three years, Lovington said, she has taken groups of kids to the STAR rallies, which used to stand for Smoke-free Teens are Rising.

At the rallies, she said, the teens learn that tobacco companies target youths with hidden messages. There are no old ladies in swimsuits, she said, just young, athletic people.

Through the rallies, Lovington said, she got in touch with the Kansas Department of Health and Environment. The agency was getting ready to award grants as an outreach to minority groups, she said, and we have the only minority youth group in northwest Kansas.

Lovington said she had only hoped to receive a \$5,000 grant and was pleasantly surprised to get \$10,000. The other \$10,000 grant was awarded to the Kansas Advisory Committee on Hispanic Affairs. Three \$5,000 grants were awarded to Our Gang Inc. of Wichita, Riley County Health Department in Manhattan and Urban League in Wichita.

Justin Bentzinger and Tiffany Shank interviewed members of the youth group,

Lovington said, to choose a youth coordinator to handle the money from the grant. They selected her daughter, Olivia Lovington.

"She (Olivia) was responsible to make sure what we said we would do got done," Cris said.

The money was to target minority groups, she said, but that is not a large group here. The group wanted to make the information available to all the kids, Cris said, and have talked to anyone who would listen.

To that end, the group has made anti-tobacco information available in public booths, she said, including at the Kanorado Octoberfest, where the group gave out hot-dogs, chips and pop. That appealed to the kids, she said, as they didn't need money.

The families in Kanorado have been very supportive, Cris said, and Mayor Hazel Estes has been very willing to help. Vanessa Perez is the youth representative in Kanorado, Cris said.

Perez, Jonathan Renteria, Corey Yarbrough, Juan Coyote, Crisy Hernandez, Claudia Lopez, Jeeny Lopez and Crystal Hernandez appear in the television commercial, Cris said.

Among the things targeting minorities, she said, have been having the kids on her Spanish radio show at 5 p.m. Sundays on KKCI three times to talk about tobacco and bi-lingual family nights.

During the family nights, Cris said, she has the families look for ads in magazines that are targeted to Hispanic people and bring the ads to the family nights. There are cigarettes given names to appeal to Hispanic people, she said, and the ads appear in Spanish magazines.

The kids in the family night groups wrote letters to tobacco companies, she said, telling them they don't want to see such ads in their magazines.

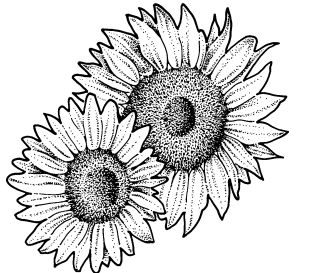
The family nights also help the participants to see how tobacco affects their culture and what the norms are, Cris said, and to teach parents how to be supportive of their kids if they are interested in being involved in the fight against tobacco.

A big part of the success of kids in these programs depends on support from their parents, she said.

But there is no guarantee. "If kids are in a youth group," Cris said, "it's not a guarantee they'll never use substances. We try to reach who we can."

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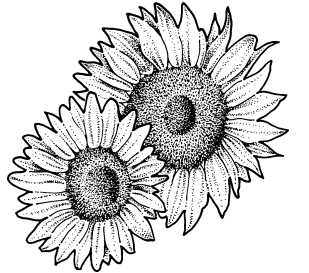
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