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Savvy South Hadley kids pledge no smoking

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SOUTH HADLEY - "You're never going to smoke ever, right?" asked 18-year-old South Hadley High School senior Josue Lopez of three South Hadley middle school boys.

The trio agreed and in doing so joined over 200 of their schoolmates - and 84 percent of the state's youth - in a lifelong pledge not to smoke cigarettes. The vows were made during The 84 Campaign, held for the first time by the high school's peer leader group Thursday afternoon.

Outside the Friendly's on Newton Street, middle school students were invited to sign one of several poster boards and make a smoke-free promise. Each student who signed received a coupon for a free ice cream and a meal on the restaurant's behalf, partially funded by a grant.

"My mom smoked and she coughs a lot," said 13-year-old Eli Stephens after making the commitment to stay away from cigarettes. "So I'm like, all right, that's not for me."

The event aimed to recruit fifth-, sixth- and seventh-graders - ages 10 to 14 - to pledge because they are at a high risk to be tempted to smoke, said Karen Walsh Pio, faculty adviser for the peer leaders.

So, Walsh Pio chose to hold the campaign at a popular after-school hangout for middle school students.

"In order to get to them, I figured let's go to where they are," she said.

Friendly's district manager Scott Bellerose said that when Walsh Pio asked him whether the restaurant would host the event, he was happy to accommodate the group.

"I figured it was a great cause to latch onto," he said. "Friendly's is deeply rooted in the local community, and we try to do whatever we can to help out."

Around 25 peer leaders attended the campaign, met with the middle school students and had them commit to the cause.

"We're trying to stick up for our own values and teach them to the middle schoolers as well," said peer leader Lauren Bonatakis, a 17-year-old senior.

Fellow peer leader Kate Paleologopoulos, a 15-year-old sophomore, agreed.

"I wanted to help the other kids and get them to be a part of the 84 percent of teens in Massachusetts who don't smoke," she said.

The high school's peer leader group, with some 45 members, does other initiative work, including anti-drinking and smoking campaigns, televised public service announcements, school assemblies, orientations for incoming high school freshmen and charity efforts with the Ronald McDonald House.

To become a peer leader, a student must be at least a sophomore, be nominated by two teachers, submit a two-page application and go through a review process.

"We have some fabulous kids. I'm looking for kids who live what they say," Walsh Pio said. "At this age, the middle schoolers respect the high school students way more than the adults, because they look up to them."

Posters at the middle school and at Friendly's three days before the event helped advertise the cause and resulted in about one-quarter of the 800-student middle school attending.

"They're pretty excited about it," said sophomore peer leader Troy Johnson, 17. "Even if it reaches one kid, it was worth it."

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"Because smoking is bad," said seventh-grader Emily Descheneaux, 13. "And, there's a lot of gross stuff in it," added 11-year-old fifth-grader Taylor Hoagland.

Fifth-grader Bridget Pedigo, 11, attended the event with her mom, Nancy, who is a smoker and has been trying to quit.

"I think it's good because I've been a smoker, and I'm glad she'd take this pledge to heart because it's very hard to quit," said Nancy Pedigo. "So hopefully they take it seriously."

"I don't want to smoke because of the bad things it can do to your body," Bridget added.

In a world where online communication and social networking are becoming ever more popular for today's youth, Walsh Pio felt the campaign provided a unique connection for the students.

"It's critically important to have this kind of face-to-face," she said.

Walsh Pio said she will hang the signed posters in the middle school as a reminder to all who pledged.

"I'll be holding them to it," she said. "I have signed proof."

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