

Topic-See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil: the 21st century movement towards Caribbean youth empowerment

For any high school student, it is the norm to focus on achieving academic excellence, participating in extracurricular activities such as sports or music or to be fanatical about the latest fashion and social craze. Truth be told, I was not an exception to the norm. However in 2010, I was confronted with the alarming statistics released by the World Health Organization which revealed that globally, the use of tobacco products is increasing, with the epidemic shifting to the developing world and if left unchecked, tobacco-related deaths will increase to more than 8 million **per** year by 2030 and an approximated 81% of those deaths will occur in the developing world. For a period of time, I was frustrated and relentlessly questioned how could these companies commit morally reprehensible acts that were claiming lives and justify their activities as merely business?

Therefore I was more than honoured to be a part of the team that staged, under the auspices of the Jamaica Cancer Society, a member of the Jamaica Coalition for Tobacco Control, Jamaica's first ever "Kick Butts Day" in March of 2010. I was glad for the chance to use this day of youth advocacy against smoking, as a platform to voice my views given that the youth are not provided with adequate avenues to voice their concerns.

Although the dangers of cigarette smoking have been taught in some schools and highlighted by organizations such as the Heart Foundation and the Jamaica Cancer Society, not many people appreciate that secondhand smoking is just as hazardous to the health. Containing over 4000 chemicals, with more than 50 of that figure being known carcinogens, tobacco smoke creates an unhealthy and poisonous environment **in which one has to live**. Thus, during the staging of Kick Butts Day, the Campion College team took on the task of acting as youth representatives to join the global fight against tobacco smoking. We devised our own logo for the day and designed a variety of activities aiming to discourage youth from smoking as well as to promote awareness of the lurking dangers of cigarette smoke.

Jamaican smoking statistics were used to determine the number of Campion students who would be projected to die as a result of cigarette smoking – a figure of 96 of the school population numbering just over 1450. A cemetery of balloons was used to represent each individual so as to provide a powerful visual message to our audience.

A comprehensive list of the constituents of tobacco smoke was displayed which surprised many students as they learned that the side stream smoke inhaled, contained carbon monoxide, ammonia, formaldehyde, cyanide and acetone...harmful chemicals that they were accustomed to noting in household cleaning products, rocket fuel and batteries.

A cigarette box competition was held for students to incorporate graphic warnings on cigarette boxes – a practice that has been adopted by a number of countries as it has been shown to be a powerful deterrent to prospective smokers. Additionally, the cost of smoking was highlighted – both financially and health-wise. The detrimental effects on one's appearance were conveyed through the use of colourful posters and a mock crime scene where the numerous negative effects on the body were

displayed on the chalk outline of the victim. We believed that the facts were sobering and should be stressed to the young students.

As a citizen of a developing country, it is quite common to be bombarded by commercials suggesting that smoking would make us increasingly attractive and popular, issues we, the youths struggle with daily. Subsequently, the lure of advertising was another area of interest to us. To address our concerns, we showed a documentary that exposed how tobacco companies covered up research for a number of years— research that would have better informed persons of the health risks involved in taking up smoking.

To show our commitment to the cause, a pledge wall was mounted to allow students to make their individual promises with respect to not smoking and encouraging others to resist. In the run-up to 'Kick Butts Day', interviews were conducted to allow students to air their views on smoking. While they displayed knowledge about the non-communicable diseases that plague smokers, the students were unaware that they were targeted as replacement customers for the smokers that die daily because of their habit.

The team took the movement of empowerment to another level by drafting three anti-smoking petitions that addressed the need for smoke-free spaces, the placement of graphic warnings on cigarette packaging, and the proper enforcement of tobacco control measures in order to protect the youth of Jamaica. For each of our three petitions, a record 400 signatures were obtained. These petitions were brought before honourable members of the Jamaican Parliamentary Human Resources and Social Development Committee and I am pleased to announce that on July 15, 2013, the Minister of Health, **the Honourable Dr. Fenton Ferguson**, announced the ban on smoking in public places. Upon hearing the news, we were ecstatic yet humbled to know that our country is making progress towards protecting its citizens.

Even though I am no longer a member of the Champion College team, the invaluable lessons learned have not departed. I am nevertheless persuaded that government bodies should continue to strive for a more holistic approach towards development of the region. The ability of minors to purchase tobacco products without any queries about ages still calls for concerns. The day where we see no tobacco products, a reduction in the number of individuals suffering from respiratory, cardiovascular and cancer-related illnesses due to smoking, hear no more fallacies about the benefits of tobacco smoking and witness governments fully speaking out against tobacco companies, is a goal that we must collectively work towards achieving.

In order to effectively confront a problem, it is important to understand its dimensions, characteristics and context in which it occurs. For Caribbean nationals, their realities must be considered unique and hereby must not be approached with loose, unspecific control methods that will fail to address the distinctive etiological agents for tobacco smoking. In closing, I urge us all to fight for a life of action, not reaction as a life of reaction is one of slavery, both intellectually and spiritually.