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Teens encourage shoppers to give up tobacco products

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Lunchtime shoppers at Hy-Vee were greeted Wednesday by smiling teenagers with tough questions.

"Hi, do you have any tobacco products with you today?" they asked. "If you want to throw them away, we'll give you a dollar off a meal here."

The teens -- student council members from Wood River High School and Heartland Lutheran High School -- were taking part in Kick Butts Day, a national day of youth activism encouraging smokers to give up their habit, from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Wednesday.

Tobacco Free Hall County partnered with Hy-Vee to hand out cessation materials, including "quit now" cards, brochures and \$1 off coupons from the Hy-Vee food court.

Seniors Sydney McCoun, Shelby Schultz, McKenzie Boshart and Megan Willoughby were among the Wood River students handing out information.

The girls said greeting people and asking about their tobacco use got easier once they developed a routine. Most people were friendly enough, but getting rejected was still hard, Schultz said.

Some customers took the information, while others told the teens they were at the store to purchase tobacco products, the girls said.

For the customers who were nonsmokers, the students offered praise and congratulations.

Senior Kara Dunn, junior Lara Bergdolt, freshman Courtney Hiegel and sophomore Lauren Staehr, all from Heartland Lutheran, said they had one lady go back to her vehicle to get her cigarettes so she could throw them away and receive a meal coupon.

Staehr said they all decided to take part in the Kick Butts Day event because they wanted to help make Nebraska healthier.

"It's our future and we can choose to make a difference," Dunn said.



Heartland Lutheran Student Council members working with Tobacco Free Hall County (from left) Kara Dunn, Lara Bergdolt, Courtney Hiegel and Lauren Staehr, greet Hy-Vee customers with an offer to throw their tobacco products away and receive a dollar-off coupon for food at the grocery store as part of Kick Butts Day on Wednesday. (Independent/Barrett Stinson)

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Hiegel added that secondhand smoke is also dangerous and can cause health problems and even death.

Tim Zeleski, Tobacco Free Hall County project coordinator, was excited to see the students at work.

"These kids are here for the right reasons," he said. "It's nice to see the youth taking an active role. Eighty-five percent of adults started using tobacco before age 18. The tobacco companies know that and they target kids. They're preying on kids."

He praised the students for making their own signs to promote nonsmoking and for coming up with ways to greet customers and share information. He said making "cold contacts" isn't an easy thing to do and he found it neat that the teens were engaging adults in a difficult conversation.

"They're intelligent kids," he said. "They're here because they believe in what they're doing."

He also said he was grateful to Hy-Vee for allowing them to hand out information at the store.

Shannon Frink, Hy-Vee dietician, said the store is wellness focused and they try to promote health in the community. To help achieve that goal, a five-week smoking cessation program, Breathe Free, is offered to the public through Hy-Vee. Anyone who is interested can contact Frink at the store.

"We work on replacing smoking with a healthy, positive behavior," she said.

Frink watched some of the students as they greeted customers Wednesday and said she was impressed with their enthusiasm.

Heartland student council sponsor Robin Seim said her students voted unanimously to participate in the event. They were well-informed on the dangers associated with smoking because they had prepared posters and information on the topic for their school earlier in the academic year. However, she was still surprised by how outgoing the students were Wednesday.

"I'm proud of them," she said.

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