San Antonio Teens Use ‘Photovoice’ to Raise Awareness of Tobacco Prevention

SAN ANTONIO—Memorial High School student Victor Hernandez points to his photograph of a smoked cigarette butt lodged in the crack of a sidewalk.

The photo caption starts: “Cigarettes get between everything.”

“People might dream to be a doctor, lawyer – then cigarettes get introduced,” Victor said of the photo’s meaning. “With every cigarette it gets harder and harder to quit, you get closer to death. Your original dream goes away.”

Victor is one of eight students from Edgewood Independent School District’s Kennedy and Memorial high schools who recently partook in a “Photovoice Smoke-Free” project, where students took photos and wrote captions to visually describe the problem of tobacco to policy- and decision-makers.

The project, sponsored by the San Antonio Tobacco Prevention and Control Coalition, paired tobacco prevention researchers at the Institute for Health Promotion Research at The UT Health Science Center at San Antonio with students in the Youth Against Gang Activity program of the Family Service Association, a San Antonio nonprofit agency.

For several Saturdays over the past few months, the students studied photography, walked their neighborhoods and took pictures.

Then they met to discuss their photos, write captions and create presentation boards.

“The kids are telling us the story. They’re telling us what the problem is. They’re living the problem,” Ricardo Espinoza of the Family Service Association.

Tobacco indeed is a big problem in San Antonio. Statistics show that middle-school youths in San Antonio have a higher percentage of tobacco use (13.6 percent) than their counterparts in the rest of Texas (9.5 percent).

“A lot of people say, ‘Oh, don’t smoke, and this and that.’ But it’s in our homes,” said Christian Alarcon-Avila, a Photovoice participant from Kennedy High School. “It’s not just in advertisements and commercials. It’s in our homes. It’s all around us.”

The students recently showcased their presentation boards to more than 50 friends, family members and health and policy officials at a ceremony Jan. 22, 2010, at the Alameda Koehler Auditorium in San Antonio.
Photos featured vivid scenes of burned-up piles of cigarette butts, “matchbox” business cards and empty cigarette packages and labels littering walkways, grassy areas.

“These pictures mean a lot about what we feel about this industry and our point of view,” said Holly Corriher of Kennedy High School.

Several health and policy dignitaries lauded the students work at the ceremony. Among those in attendance were: members of the San Antonio Tobacco Prevention and Control Coalition, a state-funded alliance of organizations that work together to prevent tobacco use in Bexar County; Amelie G. Ramirez, Dr.P.H., director of the Institute for Health Promotion Research (IHPR) at the UT Health Science Center, a coalition partner; Luis Velez, Ph.D., Photovoice project facilitator and a researcher at the IHPR; Bryan Alsip, M.D., M.P.H., assistant director of the San Antonio Metropolitan Health District; and Matthew Jones, legislative director for Texas State Rep. Joaquin Castro.

“We believe that participation helped these students identify important issues related to tobacco through group discussions and photographs and empowered the students to take social action within their community,” Dr. Ramirez said.

Photovoice participant Jamika Rockett, a Kennedy High School student who attended the ceremony with her family, talked about her photo of a very young boy, standing sort of slumped over, eyes slightly rolled, mimicking how his father smoked.

“It’s sad because his dad – when he grows up, that’s who he wants to be,” she said.

Jamika’s mother, Rhoda Rockett, was inspired by how hard her daughter worked to create visually stunning photographs that showed how harmful smoking can be.

Rhoda even quit smoking because of Jamika’s work.

“She made a great impression on her brothers and sisters and especially me. I was a smoker. She motivated her own mother to completely stop smoking,” Rhoda said. “I am very proud of her.”

Joann Aguirre of Kennedy High School said the Photovoice project will have a lasting effect on those who were involved and those who see the photos and captions.

“I want to thank everybody who was in it...for wanting to change things,” she said.

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The Institute for Health Promotion Research (IHPR) investigates the causes and solutions to the unequal impact of cancer and chronic disease among certain populations, including Latinos, in San Antonio, South Texas and the nation. The IHPR, founded in
The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio is the leading research institution in South Texas and one of the major health sciences universities in the world. With an operating budget of $668 million, the Health Science Center is the chief catalyst for the $16.3 billion biosciences and health care sector in San Antonio’s economy. The Health Science Center has had an estimated $36 billion impact on the region since inception and has expanded to six campuses in San Antonio, Laredo, Harlingen and Edinburg. More than 25,600 graduates (physicians, dentists, nurses, scientists and other health professionals) serve in their fields, including many in Texas. Health Science Center faculty are international leaders in cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, aging, stroke prevention, kidney disease, orthopaedics, research imaging, transplant surgery, psychiatry and clinical neurosciences, pain management, genetics, nursing, dentistry and many other fields. For more information, visit [www.uthscsa.edu](http://www.uthscsa.edu).