



▲ Former tobacco industry manager La Tanisha Wright.

By Odell B. Ruffin
WI Staff Writer

Each year, 47,000 Blacks die from tobacco-related illnesses, while tobacco products generate \$221 million in profit for the tobacco industry, according to the Centers for Disease Control. La Tanisha Wright, a former tobacco industry manager, decided to walk away from a lucrative career, when she discovered that R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company was deliberately marketing Kool cigarettes to Black youth.

Former Employee Takes on Tobacco Company

Kool cigarettes reportedly have a 30 percent increase in nicotine, according to a study by the Massachusetts Department of Health. Kool is the leading brand targeted toward Black celebrities, and people identified as urban leaders for commercial purposes.

"I had a problem with them targeting youth. That is where I got fed up. They ordered the product only for the Black community, with colorful displays all around them. They were targeting drug dealers with the selling of Kool, only they called them urban leaders. They were street hustlers targeted to purchase their cigarettes, in hopes that they would pass it onto their customers for an extra high," Wright said.

Now a West Region Director for the National African American Tobacco Prevention Network (NAATPN), Wright reveals

the truth about the company in various seminars across the U.S. In a session held at the THEARC in Southeast, organizations like the American Lung Association and Planned Parenthood were in attendance.

"I found some of the information very shocking, and I think we all need to be aware of the dangers this may cause to many children in the community," said Travis Dread Hughes, Deputy Project director of the American Lung Association.

R.J. Reynolds merged with Brown and Williamson to form a giant operation called Reynolds America Inc. in 2004. The deal expanded the companies to produce about one of every three cigarettes smoked in the U.S., and makes about \$10 billion in annual sales.

"Coming from living at the

poverty level at age 21 to having access to money, along with a different lifestyle, was very attractive. But it bothered me walking into stores and seeing cigarette signs placed near a toy section," Wright said.

An agreement designed to prevent tobacco companies from targeting young people is the

Tobacco Master Settlement Agreement (MSA), originally enacted between the four largest U.S. tobacco companies, and the Attorneys General of 46 states. The agreement provides restrictions on practices by the companies and allows for payments by those companies to state governments to compensate for health-care costs for people with smoking-related illnesses.

"I discovered later what the MSA was about. The company never disclosed any information to us when I began to work for

them," Wright said.

According to Wright, R.J. Reynolds Company studied Blacks through the role of identification, and created a marketing strategy based on a model of the Black consumer's lifestyle, including preferences in music, dialect, style and taste.

"They study everything about us, like our health issues, stress levels, education and reproductive rate. It's no joke. They look at us like lab rats. Everything is done for a reason and they have the money for it," Wright said.

NAATPN continues to address tobacco concerns in the Black community through a grassroots organization advocacy necessary to help future challenges. An estimated 1.6 million Blacks who are now under the age of 18 will become regular smokers according to a study done by NAATPN.