

# Local teens fight for a cause through PHAST

## HIGHLIGHTS

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By Henna Hundal - Teens in the Newsroom program

For Turlock High junior Michael Magana, the call to action was simple. “Both my grandma and grandpa were smokers, and I needed some way to inspire them to quit,” he says.

It didn't take Magana long to discover that his answer lay in joining Turlock High's branch of the Protecting Health and Slamming Tobacco (PHAST) youth coalition, a local outreach program designed to increase awareness about tobacco's harmful effects.

Founded in 2005 by the Stanislaus County Office of Education Prevention Programs Department and Health Service Agency, PHAST unifies more than 800 student participants from 31 high schools in a powerful mission: to keep communities healthy, happy and tobacco-free.

Achieving such a goal is impossible without that special type of commitment that springs from the heart, and for members such as Magana, that commitment is plain and clear. From handing out pamphlets to taking part in rallies to holding presentations in elementary schools, PHAST club participants spread their message in any way they can.

This dedication recently was exemplified by the school activities that Turlock High's PHAST Club put on in recognition of Red Ribbon Week, a nationwide drug and tobacco awareness campaign that lasted this year from Oct. 28 to Nov. 1. Each day at lunch, students ran informational and interactive booths that garnered hundreds of signed "Tobacco-Free for Life" pledge cards, as well as a banner with the signees' handprints.

Some of these activities, Turlock's PHAST club has implemented for years. Others were from a fresh bank of ideas developed after meeting last month with 20 other PHAST Clubs at the ninth annual Tobacco Slam Training. The six-hour training, which took place in Modesto, featured a special presentation from keynote speaker La Tanisha C. Wright, a former big-tobacco marketing manager who now serves as a prominent anti-tobacco activist.

Wright urged her teen listeners to find their power and to be their own champions of change. "The tobacco industry doesn't care about preserving your innocence or preserving your quality of life," she said. "It's up to you to make healthy decisions regarding your life. You only have one life to live."

Such a statement resonates well with Turlock High junior Maranda Starkweather, for whom studying the tobacco industry juggernaut was a motivating factor in joining the PHAST mission.

"One thing about PHAST club that really interests me is learning about how much tobacco companies victimize the public," she says.

Facing these tough facts about tobacco and the industry behind it can be unsettling at times. It's a hard reality that takes some courage to confront. But for students like Magana, it's that courage to act, that willingness to take charge and to take a stand, that has made the world of difference.

“I’m very proud that my commitment to PHAST club and tobacco awareness has inspired my grandparents to quit smoking,” he says. “It’s definitely been such a rewarding experience.”



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