

Anti-tobacco campaign catches interest of Niskayuna students



Parker Stygles, left, and Kara Petreikis. (Photo provided)

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NISKAYUNA — Soon-to-be Niskayuna High School student Kara Petreikis had never given much thought to tobacco and cigarettes until her friend Parker Stygles invited her to attend the Reality Check New York conference at Colgate University in mid-July.

The conference, open to kids and young adults ages 13-19, was a three-day seminar on recognizing, avoiding, and preventing the use of tobacco in young people. But when Petreikis was first invited, she mostly thought spending time at a college for the first time alongside a good friend sounded too good to pass up.

“She was like, there’s good food there. It’s fun,” Petreikis recalled after coming home from the conference. She also liked the cause, especially because her grandmother, with whom she is close, smoked cigarettes.

“I was like, it’s for a good cause. I would like to tap into this,” she said.

This is the sort of social momentum Reality Check New York hopes to incite among teens and young adults. Reality Check is a teen-led, adult-mentored movement that mostly focuses on stopping advertising to young people.



Parker Stygles, left, and Kara Petreikis. (Photo provided)

At the conference, after learning about the tobacco industry through workshops and speakers, the students took place in a “selfie chain” where they took pictures of themselves holding signs with antismoking sentiments. They then sent the pictures to the Motion Picture Association of America, petitioning for an “R” rating for all movies that depict people smoking.

The activity was reminiscent of other local initiatives, such as a recent smoke-free movie night at Afrim’s Sports in Colonie and a “Play Hard, Breathe Easy” basketball game in Troy.

Petreikis said her favorite part of the conference was listening to public speakers like La Tanisha Wright, a former trade marketing manager and controlling manager with Brown and Williamson Tobacco Company. Upset by marketing practices that targeted youth and people of color, Wright has been an anti-tobacco activist since 2004.

“I enjoyed how interactive the people who came to give us speeches were,” Petreikis said.

After being so affected by public speakers at the conference, she became inspired to spread the information

she learned.

“I’ve already talked to all my family members about this,” she said. “I want them to be educated as much as I got educated, and know the effects and the defects of smoking, and how they target little kids.

“Hopefully I can influence other people on how to quit,” she continued. “I have so many thoughts running through my brain right now. I’m so passionate about everything, all of this. I just want people to stop smoking.”

Petreikis said she plans to join clubs at Niskayuna High School that spread messages about not using tobacco, especially because she has friends, close in age, who smoke.

Both Petreikis and Stygles attended Iroquois Middle School and will begin ninth grade in the fall.

“I would like to make this generation so advanced in knowledge that all the generations after ours, they can gain knowledge on how to quit it, too,” Petreikis said.

“It’s advancing all the generations’ knowledge.”